

Be Slightly Evil

A Playbook for Sociopaths

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First Edition

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First Edition

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Inside the Tempo

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Preface

Sometimes, ambitious projects are born of an obsessive-compulsive desire to tie up loose ends rather than elegant *ab initio* architectural visions. This book is one such project: a set of loose ends explored over three years and fifty-plus issues of the “Be Slightly Evil” newsletter, which I published between 2010 and 2013. The list grew from nothing to over 2200 subscribers today. I wish I could continue writing it, but the time has come to wrap up this long journey, put a bow on it, and seek out new adventures.

To pull all the material together, I wrote one, final ambitious essay specially for this book, “Inside the Tempo,” a rather demanding 5000-plus word piece that pulls together much of the material covered in the last three years into one capstone idea to help you navigate the treacherous world of adversarial decision-making.

I originally intended to publish this piece as the final issue, but a newsletter called *Be Slightly Evil* wouldn’t live up to its name if it didn’t pull at least one slightly evil move on its readers. This is that move: you have to buy the eBook to get the Grand Finale essay.

The loose ends that I explored and tied up in the BSE list came from two sources: my first book *Tempo*, and the “Gervais Principle” series, which is now available as an eBook.

Tempo was a book about decision-making based on a rather ambitious Grand Design that covered a lot of territory I was already familiar with. But I consciously left out the problem of adversarial decision-making under competitive conditions because I sensed the material was beyond the scope of the *Tempo* Grand Design.

“The Gervais Principle” was a series I wrote on ribbonfarm.com about organizational politics and decision-making. Since that series evolved as a close-reading of the TV show, *The Office*, I had to leave out many interesting questions and ideas that I could not fit into that framework.

Again, there was a Grand Design, this time one derived from the big themes in the show.

So I was left with a large, messy dark continent of rich ideas for which I did not have a Grand Design. An email list seemed to be the natural way to explore this continent bottom-up, and so I began writing the *Be Slightly Evil* email newsletter.

Over the course of three years, the newsletter explored questions big and small, silly and profound, deeply interlinked and stubbornly isolated. Thanks to the dozens of email and in-person conversations with readers sparked by those newsletters, I was able to explore the dark continent to my satisfaction. While I cannot say that I have truly mastered this space of ideas, I certainly feel like I've surveyed and explored it pretty extensively.

So as a compilation of bottom-up explorations in the dark, this collection inevitably has plenty of rough edges and significant variation in the quality of the pieces. It also lacks a pleasing and clean architectural scheme. But what it lacks in consistency, polish and high-modernist design, I hope it makes up for in sheer, slummy favela variety and direct applicability. In contrast to most of my writing, I have not avoided specific prescriptions in these essays.

While there was no Grand Design informing this book, Jane Huang, who helped edit and produce it, suggested an excellent overarching structure that we've been able to retrofit here. In reviewing the archives, she noticed that the newsletter issues each seemed to naturally fit into one of the elements of John Boyd's famous OODA (Observe-Orient-Decide-Act) model, which you'll encounter early in the book. So we partitioned the material that way. The partitioning is not perfect, and many pieces sprawl and leak outside their "home" sections, but overall, we think we've created a more useful navigation structure here than a lazy chronological ordering based on the newsletter sequence.

While the book is still more of a random-access collection than a tightly sequenced end-to-end read, we think you'll get more out of it if you read (or re-read, for newsletter subscribers) in the suggested sequence.

Where do we go from here? I hope, for you, the reader, the future holds many occasions for refining your own Slightly Evil thinking and decision-making skills. If you discover any particularly clever ideas, I hope you will share them with me.

As for me, my interest in the Slightly Evil space of ideas has forked down two paths.

One leads to what I hope will be a future Grand Design distillation of the ideas here. If I ever get there, you might see a new and expanded edition of *Tempo* covering adversarial decision-making in a few dense new chapters. Or perhaps a whole new book. Or a James-Bond-Villain scheme to take over the world.

The other path leads to practice and application. More than anything else I've written, the ideas here are ones I've tried and tested in real life a great deal. I hope to continue to do so. I've come to think of this as a special practice within my consulting business: the Slightly Evil Practice. An approach to business problems that isn't all win-win and Happy Culture. Not all my clients are willing or able to adopt Slightly Evil approaches to business problems, but those who do generally find it to be a very fertile framework. Since they tend to have a great sense of humor, Slightly Evil clients are, to be honest, my favorite ones. They are just fun to work with.

So if you're in need of some support for your Slightly Evil scheming needs (anything from designing your own personal Evil Laugh to figuring out how your business can outfox the competition), you know whom to call. I can be reached at vgr@ribbonfarm.com.

And in closing, a big thank you to all those who kept me company on this three-year journey. I hope this rough playbook for living a Slightly Evil life serves as a worthwhile prize.

See you around on ribbonfarm.com and elsewhere on the Internet. And don't forget to check out the companion *Gervais Principle* eBook.

The Soul of Being Slightly Evil

How Deep is Be Slightly Evil?

Is there more to Be Slightly Evil philosophy than just an adolescent attraction to being a bit of a bad-ass?

I picked the name mainly because it seemed like a good joke at Google's expense. "Don't Be Evil" smacks of a certain paternalistic hubris that even that well-intentioned behemoth of a company should be wary of. I believe that at that scale of immense power, self-policing is simply too dangerous, and only checks and balances constructed out of outside forces pursuing *different* ends can curb true evil.

But enough about the inspiration. What about Be Slightly Evil, the little baby antithesis at you-and-me scales? Yes, it is mostly tongue-in-cheek, but to me the phrase also stands for a few philosophical ideas, and keeping it constantly in front of me helps me remember those ideas.

- **The universe isn't here for our benefit:** As best as we can tell, the universe is *not* a benign environment.
- **Advantage Determinism:** Known and as-yet-unknown unknown laws govern more of natural phenomena, including human behavior, than we like to admit.
- **Humility:** Towards nature and the unknown that is. Not humility in a social or interpersonal sense.
- **Acknowledge "Evil":** I can't define good and evil, but I do know that if the concepts are meaningful at all, we have at least a little bit of each in us. Acknowledgement beats denial.

These ideas overall, add up to a pragmatic truth-driven philosophy of

moral minimalism. Every new "true" thing I learn seems to shrink the domain where I can hold useful moral opinions. There is no point having a

moral opinion about the law of gravity. So truth is also about increasing moral minimalism. As you learn more, you should have less need for moral opinions. Or as the French-Swiss novelist Madame de Staél once said, “When you understand everything, you can forgive everything.” We may never reach that asymptotic state within our human lifespans, but every little bit of pointless moral “responsibility” you can shrug off helps.

But perhaps the biggest deep idea behind Be Slightly Evil is thermodynamics. I am endlessly fascinated by the idea of entropy. It suggests that not only is the universe *indifferent* to our presence, it is at least mildly hostile to it. We are low-entropy creatures trying hopelessly to swim upstream in a universe that’s gradually winding down towards a maximum-entropy heat death. So the universe itself is, in a sense, Slightly Evil. So by some sort of fractal logic, as little subsets of the universe, our true nature is probably slightly evil as well. Of course, this is a wild metaphysical leap in the dark, but something about this conjecture appeals to me at a deep level.

One principle this philosophy gives me is what I call my amorality heuristic: an idea is Slightly Evil only if it is, in principle, equally valuable to both good and evil people. Anything that works better *only* if you are good, is naturally suspect in my mind.

Be Somebody or Do Something

To maintain plausible deniability, I try to focus on the *how* of the Be Slightly Evil theme, rather than the *why*. Besides filtering out means that are not justifiable by any ends, I leave means-ends justifications to you. I assume you have good reasons to be interested in the subject, but I'd rather not know. I adopted this principle as a basic precaution, but I had no idea it would actually be tested. An anonymous reader once emailed me asking for help with a whistle-blowing decision, and included details of his situation. Fortunately, he kept identifiable details, such as names, to himself. I hastily pulled back from the brink of becoming an accessory. I only like messes if I am being paid to handle them.

Anyway, the incident got me thinking about why people turn to Slightly Evil manipulative behavior in the first place. Why can't you just stay on the straight-and-narrow, pay your dues, and live an honorable life? I found a great answer in Robert Coram's fascinating book, *Boyd: The Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War*, which has now bumped Robert Greene's *48 Laws of Power* to the #2 spot in my Be Slightly Evil reading list. You should also check out Chet Richards' *Certain to Win*, an application of Boyd's ideas to business.

The answer is a decision that Boyd challenged each of his acolytes to make: *in life you eventually have to decide whether to be somebody, or do something*. Whistle-blowing is one of those situational decisions that can precipitate this bigger existential decision. But everybody eventually comes to their own personal be somebody/do something fork in the road. I hit mine in the summer of 2000.

Ask yourself what you want your life to have been like, when you are on your deathbed. If you instinctively envision yourself in the future, at the peak of your life, you are a *be somebody* person. If you instinctively envision the impact you might have had, and are fuzzy on what you personally will be like, you are a *do something* type.

Now for some background on Boyd before we dive into the idea, and interpret your answer.

Who was John Boyd?

Like most aerospace engineers, I had a passing familiarity with Boyd's work before reading the book. I knew of his development of something called Energy-Maneuverability theory, which is the modern approach to fighter combat analysis and warplane design. I knew of his famous OODA loop.^{*} But I had no idea that these were just the tip of the Boyd iceberg.

Since Boyd never wrote down his ideas in book form, but spread them almost entirely through classified briefings, he is not very well known outside the military. But in terms of both depth and impact, his ideas were arguably more profound than those of better-known military thinkers such as Clausewitz, Schelling and Mahan.

Coram claims that Boyd should probably be considered the greatest military thinker since Sun Tzu, and once you understand the Boyd story and the magnitude of what he achieved, you realize this is not an overstatement. Boyd was a virtuoso practitioner (the best fighter pilot of his generation), an incredibly creative idea guy, and an incisive philosopher to boot. Few people manage to be even two of those things, let alone all three. Boyd was a modern military Da Vinci. But perhaps the most fascinating thing about him is that he did not just change the way wars are fought. He actually used his ideas to win battles *inside* the military, running rings around the Pentagon bureaucracy, and building a cadre of acolytes who went on to transform every corner of the American military. Though his ideas helped win several actual wars, the greatest victories they helped script were won inside the military establishment itself.

In fact, Boyd's story reads like a real-life version of *Yes Minister* and *Yes Prime Minister*, which we've talked about before. Except that Boyd, unlike Jim Hacker, took on the bureaucracy and won. The story has its humorous moments, but it is ultimately a sobering story. The victory came at a huge personal cost to him and his fellow reformers.

I'll probably mine Boyd's work for more ideas in the future, but let's start with the *be somebody or do something* life decision.

The Right Answer

If you converged on a “be somebody” answer like *CEO, tenured professor*, or simply *rich and famous*, you are in for some hard introspection, because Boyd had a definite “right answer” in mind: *do something*.

Here's a curious paradox: the more you insist on sticking to a straight-and-narrow path defined by your own evolving principles, rather than the expedient one defined by current situation, the more you'll have to twist and turn in the real world. The straight path in your head turns into spaghetti in the real world.

On the other hand, the more your path through the real world seems like a straight road, defined by something like a “standard” career script, the more you'll have to twist and turn philosophically to justify your life to yourself. Every step that a true Golden Boy careerist takes, is marred by deep philosophical compromises. You sell your soul one career move at a time.

If you are driven by your own principles, you'll generally search desperately for a calling, and when you find one, it will consume your life. You'll be driven to actually produce, create or destroy. You'll want to do something that brings the world more into conformity with your own principles. As Shaw said, “The reasonable man adapts himself to the conditions that surround him. The unreasonable man adapts surrounding conditions to himself. All progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

Uncompromising private principles that you do not seek to justify to others are necessary but not sufficient. To actually keep moving forward, you'll find that you need to twist and turn. Your terrain is the tortuous maze of truth-avoidance paths worn out by the “be somebody” types, and paved by the medal-awarding priests. Your mission is to tackle head-on, the truths that they work hard to avoid. Your own twists and turns are about avoiding

or outmaneuvering those who want to deny truths and defend obvious falsehoods.

At some level, the be-somebody types dimly realize that their apparently straight career paths are actually the philosophically convoluted truth-avoiding ones. That's why the moves made by slightly evil types seem like "shortcuts" to them. They don't get how somebody can get someplace meaningful faster, without being on what seems to them to be the straight-line path, and without awards to measure progress.

Because ultimately the straight and narrow path defined by your own principles, grounded in truth-seeking, despite its apparent twists and turns in the real world, is the faster road to meaningful destinations.

Legacies of Being versus Legacies of Doing

If you are reasonable, and decide to simply be somebody, you can achieve your "be somebody" objective and wrap up your very successful life, having offended nobody, and with nobody caring that you actually lived. Display your certificates, medals and trophies proudly, and retire happy. Try not to think too much about the fact that you'll be forgotten the week after you die, your certificates, medals and trophies mothballed in boxes in attics, to be eventually gotten rid of by an indifferent great-grandchild.

If you are unreasonable, even if you actually manage to find a calling and do something that you will be remembered for, chances are high you'll die destitute and unrecognized, after a lifetime of maneuvering, fighting and making implacable enemies and loyal-to-the-death friends at every turn. Instead of medals that nobody cares about, you'll collect the detritus of failed and successful battles.

And interestingly, people will scramble anxiously to preserve and pore over your unfinished junk.

Boyd died in near-poverty, depressed and anxious about his legacy. He spent his last years battling cancer and worrying about all his papers.

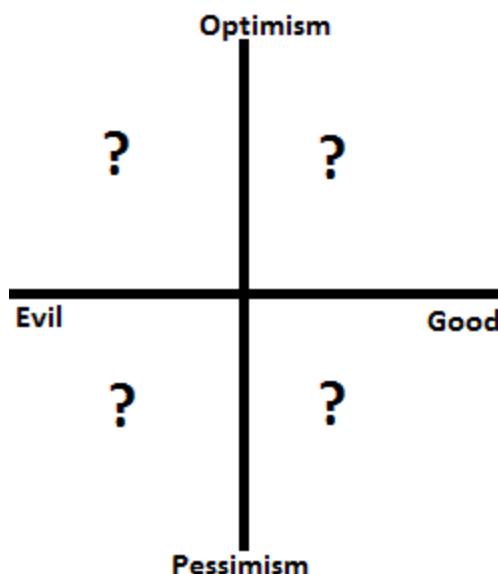
He died a nobody by some reckonings. But he died having *done* something.

When he died in 1997, his acolytes scrambled to make sure his work was preserved. Boyd's papers are now preserved at the Marine Corps Research Center at Quantico. He never rose above Colonel, but he will be remembered, and his briefings pored over, long after the medals of the generals of his time are auctioned off by their descendants on the *Antiques Roadshow*.

Double-Talk and Chaos-Making

Here's a philosophical challenge for you: you've got a 2x2 matrix, with evil-to-good on the x axis and pessimism-to-optimism on the y axis.

Try and think of people to pigeonhole in each of the four quadrants. Now what about each group leaps out at you? Are any of the quadrants empty? If you had to label each with an archetype, what would you call it? Try and think of the most famous person you can for your labels, because our mental models of famous people are caricatures that work well for this sort of thing. Alternately, you can try labels based on motifs or metaphors of some sort.



With every 2x2 view of the world, the challenge is of course to see if you can break the dichotomies involved, at least locally for your own situation, even if you cannot invent a philosophy that entirely transcends the 2x2 perspective. This is much harder than it might seem. I am always amused by clumsy thinkers who latch on to a subtle idea like "dichotomy breaking" and assume that breaking an age-old one like good/evil or

optimist/pessimist just requires an airy dismissal and some trite substitution; if it were that easy we should all be much happier.

Let me see if I can offer some food for thought around this unnamed, unlabeled 2x2, and break the dichotomies locally to prise Slightly Evil thinking out of its obvious location just south-west of the origin.

Surveying the Four Quadrants

Historically, *optimistic-evil* has been associated with grand social engineering projects. The Nazis were associated with soaring eagles, 1000-year visions of a perfect society and so forth. Communists have been surprisingly similar despite nominally being the political antithesis of the Nazis.

Optimistic-good is the stuff of New Age visions and traditional religion: on the Left, they believe in vaguely comforting and fuzzy ideas about generativity, positive-thinking, abundance and general all-around benevolence in the universe that just requires great intentions to succeed. On the Right, they believe in roughly the same things, but with specific, rather than vague, religious trappings.

Pessimistic-good is often associated with a deep sense of justice and concern for protecting good (in particular, already-achieved putative good) from the threat of evil. Dedicated cops, doctors and military types have this sort of pessimistic good mentality. The pessimistic good usually see themselves as protectors of the childlike innocence that characterizes the optimistic good. In their youth, they are often guided by a strong but unexamined and untested social values. But as they age, and experience things like war and crime-fighting, which they are naturally drawn to, disillusionment with the naivete of most social values sets in, and a set of private values takes over. Clint Eastwood has played many such characters, from the classic *Dirty Harry* to the more recent *Gran Torino*, (the *Dirty Harry* movies were basically vigilante movies designed to pander to gun nuts, but the stock character evolved into a much more subtle one by *Gran Torino*).

And finally, there's the last quadrant: *pessimistic-evil*. This quadrant is most often associated with a narrow, selfish sense of fatalistic and hedonistic individualism. It is a gloomy world view that sees human nature as eternally flawed and unchanging. To act according to this mindset is to look for zero-sum exploits and social hacks to prey on the other three quadrants. Crime is distinguishable from political ideologies like fascism and communism primarily by the fundamental pessimism that informs behavior. There is no perfectability of man for Tony Soprano.

In movies, complete disillusionment turns the pessimistic-good into the pessimistic-evil (comic-book super-villains like Two-Face in Batman are examples). There is some truth to this trope. Most who walk this path of disillusionment, however, end up bitter and ineffective rather than actively evil.

Realism and Pragmatism

There is some evidence for something called “depressive realism” – the idea that pessimists are genuinely more realistic than optimists, but it is decidedly shaky (not least because “real” is primarily a philosophical question, not a psychological one), so it is safest to assume that no quadrant has a monopoly on realism. You might also choose to go all the way to solipsism and decide that realism is impossible.

Realism is a way of viewing the world, *pragmatism* is the related way of acting within it. So where do realist-pragmatists fall on this 2x2? You might be tempted to think they hover somewhere around the origin, but I have come to the conclusion that pragmatism and realism are somewhat meaningless concepts in relation to this 2x2.

This is because people in each of the four quadrants view themselves as pragmatic and realistic and the others as hopelessly unrealistic. What's more, they can all be right.

This is because pessimism and optimism aren't really attitudes about real things, which makes "realism" moot. Good and evil are about intentions, so realism is mostly irrelevant there as well. Optimism and pessimism are attitudes about possibilities when there is no empirical basis for assuming anything. It is possible to be realistic about facts in all four quadrants, but be optimistic or pessimistic about possibilities and good or evil in terms of intentions.

Naive realists are people who are avoiding taking a position about possibilities altogether. Their attitude helps them win when events are outside human control, but they tend to miss out on opportunities involving human beliefs that rely on social proof. Things that become social truths if enough people believe in them. Beliefs that create social capital rather than truth.

Naive pragmatism is similar. It is the desire to act in realistic ways to be effective. Naive pragmatists abhor empty gestures and obviously futile endeavors. Again, this works in their favor when it is the actual outcomes that matter. When "making an effort" has its own social-signalling value, naive pragmatists miss out. An example of this is a politician making a brave and futile attempt to solve some impossibly wicked problem, and earning brownie points just for trying. Naive pragmatism is for bureaucrats, not effective politicians.

Naive pragmatists are people who choose to act only when there is a realistic chance of being effective. This often makes them the most unrealistic people around, since they forgo all the fascinating possibilities of symbolic creative failure and its social rewards.

I recently read a piece in *The Atlantic* by James Fallows analyzing whether Obama has been a chess-master or a pawn in his first term. My own opinion is that the question itself is naively pragmatic (so it makes sense that a very seasoned journalist like Fallows, who has been covering American presidents since Carter, should ask the question). When you add social capital into the equation, you could say that in the beginning Obama was something of a bureaucratic naive-pragmatist. Through the first term, he has turned into more of a real politician, capable of manipulating social capital with symbolic failures and declarations of belief in what seem like

prima facie ludicrous positions to naive realists. Fallows sees this as tactical brilliance in the Truman mold, but this doesn't quite capture the transformation.

But ironically, the country itself has gone from an optimistic ("Yes, we can!") to a naively pragmatic, bureaucratic view of his presidency (hence questions based on chess metaphors, which sort of miss the essence of social capital dynamics). We evaluated Obama as a politician when he was a bureaucrat, and now that he has turned into a politician, we are evaluating him as a bureaucrat. Time lags are strange things.

Personally, I resolve this particular dichotomy by thinking of realism as a *desire* to see the world realistically, and pragmatism as a *desire* to be effective. Believing you have achieved either desire is probably a sign that you're actually trapped within one of the quadrants. It is skepticism and doubt that mark sophisticated realism and pragmatism, and distinguish them from quadrant-locked attitudes and behaviors.

Attitudes Towards Change

When you look at the compare good and evil optimists, you realize that both believe in change and the idea of "progress." The optimistic evil, when they really get going, tend to put everybody who disagrees with their idea of progress into concentration camps.

The optimistic good pursue a softer version of the same strategy: they seek out like-minded people with whom they can achieve positive resonance, and avoid people or thoughts they label "negative," a label they apply to any kind of non-scripted dissent. When they pursue action around fundamentally ugly realities, they still look for "heart-warming" and "inspirational." They are fundamentally what Barbara Ehrenreich has labeled "Bright-Sided" people. Whether or not they realize it, they put people they disagree with on the sidelines in cultural concentration camps where their voices are drowned out by positive cheerleading. This is a "tyranny of the vocal minority" consequence, since the optimistic-good (both Right and

Left varieties) are so vocal in singing the same tune. Voices of dissent do not harmonize as well.

There is a certain merit to this heuristic. Serious change requires collective action, motivation and energy. Negative thoughts and people do drain this energy. But the heuristic gets dangerous when it turns into an unchecked, runaway sort of self-reinforcing positivism.

Equally, the bottom half of the 2x2 is associated with apparent inaction and lack of change. For the pessimistic good, it is stability maintenance against the forces of evil. For those who use established social values as a proxy for “good” it is natural to consider destabilizing forces evil. Again you can find distinct Left and Right varieties.

For the pessimistic evil, ideas like balance of power and eternal patterns of exploitation have a natural appeal. The aesthetic of acting without actually changing anything appeals to both classes. In a way, they too act in ways that make stability and changelessness self-fulfilling prophecies. They are less likely to recognize this compared to self-declared progressives who instinctively understand the dynamics of self-fulfilling prophecies.

Given these divergent attitudes towards change, it is no wonder that pessimists view optimists as ignoring the darker consequences of change, and optimists view pessimists as purely inertial forces.

Being Slightly Evil

I sometimes think I should have named this philosophy “Do Slightly Evil.” Because Slightly Evil is to my mind, a do-something philosophy rather than a be-somebody philosophy. But oh well, the name is locked in, and the Google joke is too good to give up.

On the optimism/pessimism axis, Slightly Evil is an agnostic philosophy, but unlike naive naive realism/pragmatism, it is not an inactive one when social proof and signalling through empty and futile gestures are in the picture. It recognizes the value of social capital movements around

obvious falsehoods and ineffective behaviors. There is a certain inevitable level of doubletalk involved here, in that stated intentions and beliefs will not match the ones actually held. But doubletalk is at least better than doublethink.

On the good/evil axis, Slightly Evil drives towards action whether or not the consequences are clearly good or evil upfront, and starts with the assumption that simply acting for the sake of acting (otherwise known as creative destruction), and choosing churn over stability, is central to life. This is not “good” because it does not equal a belief in change as progress. But it is also not “evil” because it is not a belief in value-driven stability. Action for the Slightly Evil favors chaos creation.

But this is only a partial, local override of the powerful dichotomies we are talking about. You can see how hard it is to actually get beyond these age-old divisions: the best I’ve been able to do to justify Slightly Evil is to label it as “double-talking chaos-creation.”

No Free Lunch Instincts

When you have a philosophy called “Be Slightly Evil,” people are inevitably going to connect the dots to things like the pick-up artist (PUA) movement, neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), and all those clever ideas and techniques being constantly invented and refined by Internet marketers and big names on the speaker circuit.

I’ve had several conversations about these sorts of things with people who are convinced that I should talk or write about them and also apply them to my own business. They think I should be making a lot more money than I do. I totally agree; I just have problems with their suggested route to that outcome.

So I’ve been spending some time examining my own unease with this whole body of thinking. Why am I at ease with conversational *jiu jitsu*, organizational politicking and sociopathic philosophical attitudes, but reluctant to embrace things in this bucket of practices that I’ll call “subconscious brain hacking” of other humans? Is it just a kind of moral squeamishness? Hypocrisy? Some misplaced sense of honor and fair play? Rationalization of lack of actual skill in these skill-intensive domains?

Because these ideas are certainly effective. Without a doubt, there are valuable skills here, that can be learned and applied. If you are interested in cutting-edge thinking in this department, you might want to try the work of people like Ryan Holliday, advisor to people like Tim Ferriss and Tucker Max.

Hidden Costs

In situations like this, where my instincts tell me to stay away from something even if I cannot figure out why, I always find out later that there are hidden costs that I did not understand consciously, but my gut was reacting to. I call these my *no free lunch* instincts. These instincts are driven by a common belief among people with a certain sort of scientific

sensibility: that all true knowledge is expressible in the form of constraints or conservation principles. So if someone tells me that there is a free lunch somewhere, I make the default assumption that someone (or something), somewhere is paying/will pay costs corresponding to my gains. And until I am sure that someone isn't me (or someone/something I care about), I am not ready to use that partial knowledge, *even if it is true*. Even if I am taken advantage of in the meantime.

So to your list of “subconscious brain hacking” acronyms (PUA, NLP, SEO) you can add another one: NFL. No Free Lunch. If you cannot figure out who is paying for the lunch, you might want to reconsider eating it (or in a more pessimistic form, if you don't know who the sucker is, it is probably you).

In the case of subconscious brain-hacking skills, the costs are fairly obvious, once you think them through. Consider an example.

Let's say you learn a few clever techniques to close sales. You know the sort of thing I mean – using words that have subliminal persuasive effects, specific gestures or facial expressions, priming, cues unrelated to the sale like sexual imagery – things like that. Things that *hack the overt intentions of whoever you are interacting with, and bring unrelated desires into play*. You're dangerously close to playing with the psychological equivalent of roofies.

Let's say you've been making sales based on non-hacking communication before, with a success rate of 1% of cold calls leading to sales. Suddenly, your effectiveness explodes. You are now closing 10% of all sales. A 10x improvement.

The costs are obvious: by hacking the other person's brain this way, *you've put the valuable intelligence informing their intentions and decisions out of play*. Or to put it more crudely, there's a good chance you sold sex to a monkey that wants sex, instead of (say) graphic design skills to a company that genuinely needs it. And lost a chance to make the world of business a slightly smarter place.

I am of course, caricaturing the value proposition here. Most practitioners insist that you can be “ethical” about such practices. That *you* can take on the burden of making sure you don’t sell people what they don’t need. In other words, you are trusting yourself to navigate conditions of moral hazard with seriously incomplete information.

There is one situation where this assumption is completely justified: outright conflict. When you are genuinely in a fight, you don’t want a fair fight if you can help it. You should prefer a dumb enemy over a smart one.

But most everyday situations are only partly adversarial. To the extent that they are not, you should assume that there is value in having the other party’s fully engaged intelligence in play. There *are* non-adversarial situations when this assumption is justified, for example in parenting very young children, making *certain, very limited kinds* of decisions that affect the lives of (say) poor and uneducated people, or when you are a doctor attending to a patient. But even in these situations, it is generally unwise to completely put the other party’s intelligence out of play. Parenting, urban planning and the practice of medicine all benefit from intelligent engagement on the part of everyone involved. Moral hazard is a *hazard* because you can be tempted into rationalizing things that benefit you when you take on the burden of representing the interests of others.

Which means, if you hack someone else’s brain to get your way, there is a very good chance that you will be tempted into acting in ways that are against your best interests, as defined by a broader appraisal of the degree of alignment between your intentions and the other party’s.

The Slippery Slope

Let me be clear that there *maybe* a free lunch for you personally, which you can cash out in the popular currencies of sex, money or power. In our sales example, if your selling effectiveness increases 10x, but 8 of those new 9 customers doesn’t actually need what he/she bought and realizes it later, and quits, you can still come out ahead if you’re in the sort of business

where long-term customer retention is of no value and you expect to make a million bucks off a short-lived fad. You'll get your mansion, and chances are the suckers who bought things they didn't need will not find it worthwhile to react, but instead write the experience off as an unpleasant and expensive lesson learned.

But you'll be on a slippery slope. And quite apart from costs paid by others, you'll pay the sorts of deeper costs immortalized in fiction through various "pacts with the devil" type stories. In other words, easy rewards may come with deep costs.

How slippery is this slope? A reader from Chicago, who was recently in town, shared his view (which I think is correct), that once you start, you get addicted and turn to increasingly unconscionable uses of your skills. He made the point while describing a toxic company he once worked for: "a company that starts down the road to evil in even a small way will end up totally evil." His point reminded me of one often made in Agatha Christie novels by Hercule Poirot: that a murderer who has killed once finds it increasingly easy to kill again and again. In one novel, *Death on the Nile*, Poirot gravely tells a character, *do not open your heart to evil*.

The Dehumanization Loop

It took me a while to reconcile this conjecture with my own belief that it is possible to be Slightly Evil in a stable way. But I think I've got it now. You can only stabilize at Slightly Evil if you make sure you always "pick on someone your own size" in a general sense. I don't advocate fair fights entirely for moral reasons. I advocate them for the same reason physical trainers have you train with weights of increasing resistance. It is the only way you can grow. If you get too used to fighting below your weight class, your muscles will shrivel to match.

Hacking someone at a subconscious level presents the danger that you'll get addicted to regarding everybody as an adversary, and further, reducing them to opponents who *cannot fight back*. Not because they are

fundamentally worse than you in the particular battlefield, but because you've picked up some skill they haven't (yet) learned to defend against.

This is an impoverished view of interpersonal relationships at two levels: you've lost the richness of non-adversarial relationship dynamics, and you've lost the pleasures of interacting with fully human people. It's a loop of dehumanization, and ultimately a path to deep estrangement with the rest of the human species. For those of you who have read my ribbonfarm post, *The Gollum Effect*, ¹ this is what gollumization looks like on the *Mad Men* (or Sauron) end of the game.

There is a special case here. If you hack *yourself*, using self-suggestion techniques and other ways to deliberately delude yourself, this loop of dehumanization works much faster. Your most important relationship – the one with yourself – can get infantilized. Self-gollumization is the fastest kind there is.

So if I had to draw a boundary around Be Slightly Evil I'd have to say this: it stops being "slightly" evil when you start impoverishing your non-adversarial relationships in any way, particularly the one with yourself. In a conversation with a marketer friend recently, I phrased this idea as "keep your customers fully human."

This isn't an easy boundary to recognize, understand and respect. But then, if it were that easy, we'd all be billionaire saints leaving the world a better place than we found it. One good heuristic is to ask: after an encounter that you "win" in some sense, does the other person feel like they *learned* something valuable at a reasonable price or that they were played for a sucker, or paid too high a cost for the learning?

This only works if you haven't already dehumanized the person in your own mind. One way to test for rationalization via dehumanization is to ask: would you want to win *that way* against a spouse, friend, child, pet or parent? (Actually, having an empathy calibration scale is valuable in a lot of situations, not just this one).

A quote I recently encountered, attributed to Victor Papanek, captures this philosophy of persuasion very well: "in persuading people to buy things

they don't need, with money they don't have, in order to impress others who don't care, commercial design is probably the phoniest field in existence today.”

After a half century of this mindset, we have today's consumer culture. That philosophy of persuasion is being rapidly ported to the Internet, experience marketing and social media, and vastly amplified in the process. Bigger no-free-lunch forces are being unleashed than were ever unleashed by the Industrial Age.

The Costs and Rewards of the Hard Way

When you choose to do certain things – liking building a reputation in business, a trusted clientele or a solid personal relationship – the hard way, the costs and rewards get flipped. Instead of easy rewards and deep costs, you end up with easy costs and deep rewards.

An easy cost is a cost that is easy to pay. Money is the perfect example. It is the easiest way to pay for things, and also the easiest thing to give up, beyond a certain point. As many people like to say, money is a problem to be solved, not an end in itself. Once you've got yourself “problem solved” levels of money (corresponding to the lifestyle you want), giving up more money is far easier than (say) giving up a potentially rewarding lifelong relationship that you are tempted to exploit for immediate gain, simply because you can.

The rewards, on the other hand, are the deeper ones. A sense of deeper understanding of how the world works, and a sense of gradually increasing peace with my place in it, is the main one for me.

Playing the game of costs and rewards this way is a self-reinforcing life choice. If you accept deep costs, you will become shallower as a way to insulate yourself. It is part of your self-dehumanization. If you start to appreciate deep rewards, you will naturally become a deeper person, capable of enjoying those rewards.

Personality Archetyping

Why Does Power Corrupt?

There is a fascinating article by Jonah Lehrer in the *Wall Street Journal* about the dynamics of how power corrupts called *The Power Trip*.[‡] It describes recent research that suggests that it is actually the nice guys rather than the jerks who get power. Apparently though, the old “power corrupts” idea is true. It is *getting* power that turns people into jerks (which is different from being evil, slightly or totally). Here’s an extract:

...This result isn’t unique to Berkeley undergrads. Other studies have found similar results in the military, corporations and politics. “People give authority to people that they genuinely like,” says Mr. Keltner...

Now for the bad news, which concerns what happens when all those nice guys actually get in power. While a little compassion might help us climb the social ladder, once we’re at the top we end up morphing into a very different kind of beast.

“It’s an incredibly consistent effect,” Mr. Keltner says. “When you give people power, they basically start acting like fools. They flirt inappropriately, tease in a hostile fashion, and become totally impulsive.” Mr. Keltner compares the feeling of power to brain damage, noting that people with lots of authority tend to behave like neurological patients with a damaged orbito-frontal lobe, a brain area that’s crucial for empathy and decision-making. Even the most virtuous people can be undone by the corner office.

Fascinating though it is, I think the research is a little narrow in its focus. It does a good job of describing *what* happens, but not *why* it happens. This is a common failing in certain kinds of psychology and neuroscience research.

The “why” of any sort of behavior is usually a mish-mash of situational realities, conscious and subconscious self-interest, and distorted echoes of

unexamined distant hunter-gatherer behaviors (a.k.a “evolutionary psychology.”)

So there is a flaw in the “people give authority to people that they genuinely like” premise in the article. This is only *one* of the reasons people give others authority in real life. It is an important one though, as the person who forwarded me the article thoughtfully pointed out:

The popular mandate authority is more “natural” and “primal” [than other reasons] though. Even Chimps and Macaques have “democratic” leaders, not elected by ballot, but by a mix of “clannish” power inheritance, Machiavellian alliance-making, and the results of fights/aggression etc. When such a “troupe leader” transgresses authority by being an ass/rapacious/stupid/overbearing, or when the leader’s “total power” (a convolution of inheritance, alliances and approval) goes below the threshold of other “potential” leaders (who also have inheritances, alliances and muscles), there is usually a large fight (with bloodshed, murder, and killing of the babies of the loser clans), to replace the alpha monkey.

But there are at least two other reasons. We also have the pre-social one-on-one kind of authority dynamics: A gives B authority if B can beat him up (physically or psychologically). This has historically been declining in importance for thousands of years. But it is still sometimes a factor, when situations force a lot more 1:1 interactions than one to many, such as in sales.

But perhaps the most interesting reason is an extremely recent one in human history: we give people authority even when we *don't* like them and are *not* afraid of them if they possess valuable information or skills.

There are many such “authority-earning” skills, but one of the most important is the ability to see reality as it really is, in minimally-deluded ways. Democratic votes can be overturned when somebody is able to see and convincingly frame realities in ways that turn matters of opinion into matters of fact. If a bunch of people are marooned on an island, who are they going to elect as leader? The jerky survivalist who is the only one who can keep them alive, and is likely to walk away and just take care of himself if crossed, or the nice guy?

In that vein of thinking, my favorite definition of a CEO's job is from A. G. Lafley: "A CEO's job is to interpret external realities for a company."

I have met many people who've gained power and authority due to this particular trait, and it might conceivably be part of the explanation why power turns people into jerks. Reality is usually somewhere between neutral and slightly unpleasant, so most of the time, the "interpret external reality" job is a delicate balancing act on the leader's part: you need to keep your people connected enough to reality to be effective, but not so connected that they are demotivated and demoralized.

In other words, the "interpreting reality" part of leadership is rather like parenthood. Call it "information parenthood." You have to sustain a happy bubble for others. At the same time, as a leader, your own parent is reality itself, and it isn't a very nurturing one. Drunk and abusive Father Reality, not nurturing Mother Nature. Constantly facing the doubts and uncertainties of unfiltered realities, while protecting others, can be brutal. When things get hard, you will want to scream, "Why am I the only adult around here?"

This is also the reason leadership is often described as a *lonely* job. Your job is to survive a lack of incoming empathy and generate a positive atmosphere and empathy for others under your "information protection" umbrella. You yourself become the reservoir of harsh reality information that is yours alone to handle. Reserves of empathy can get drained, resentment of the demanding children can turn into sadism and justification for abuse. In the worst cases, the stress of being alone with the filtered-out realities that you cannot share, can break you. You can regress into child-like behaviors because you decide to take your turn at being the "child." You are tired of being the adult, and you're going to abdicate for a bit whether others like it or not. A great deal of executive coaching, such as the excellent advice from Marshall Goldsmith[§], is really about increasing your endurance at the "information parenthood" game.

And this is why, finally, it can be so rewarding, and such a huge relief, to find people to work with who are tough enough that they don't need to be protected in order to be productive. This is why startup founder teams of two are better than solo entrepreneurs. Two people who can be brutally

honest with each other, knowing that the other can take it, is a very powerful combination.

The Perils of Bitter Loserdom

I read an interesting piece in the HBR magazine, a guest piece by Rosabeth Moss Cantor titled “Powerlessness Corrupts.”¹ It is short and pointed, and makes a single interesting point: that there is a kind of corruption that can come from bitter, angry middle-management types. She describes the type as follows:

Powerlessness is particularly apparent in the middle ranks. When companies slash midlevel positions, they often increase the burden on the remaining people without increasing their efficacy and influencea combination likely to arouse risk-averse rigidity. Hemmed in by rules and treated as unimportant, people get even by overcontrolling their own turf, demanding tribute before responding to requests. They vent frustrations on others who are even more powerless. Its like a cartoon sequence: The boss chastises a worker, who curses his wife, who yells at the child, who kicks the dog.

In the Gervais-Principle based language we’ve been using, this is a case of the clueless finally getting clued in, and recognizing their exploited status. But it’s too late to do anything about it. They’ve already been trapped into the clueless-pawn world. This is how petty bureaucratic tyrants are born. Unlike losers, who never rise to this level, and normally retain the producer-skills required to move around in the economy, this type discovers loser-level clarity a little too late. And turns vicious. I’ve met a few. Normally, I run a mile. Unlike the regular clueless, they cannot be easily manipulated.

Call it bitter, trapped loserdom. They are losers caught in clueless positions, with eroded individual contributor skills. They can’t move up, they can’t move down. They’re too much company men/women to easily leave and find other jobs. They only leave if fired or laid off. So they silently endure as more work is piled on.

Why is this dangerous? This is the beginning of the end for organizations. In this state, smart people start exiting from both top and bottom as and when they are able to engineer exits.

The Unreasonable Man Effect

The Idealist-Tragedian Paradox

A key schism in the universe of ideas concerning the question of how humans should live their lives is the one between idealist and tragic views. Let's call the two associated types of people Idealists and Tragedians (a safe overload of the term in theater).

Idealism is based on a belief in the perfectability of humans. There are innumerable philosophies, religions and self-improvement theories that derive from the idealist stance. In fact the very term *self-improvement* reveals the core idealist assumption that improvement is possible. The more recent term, *personal growth*, conveys that assumption even more clearly.

Idealist views (and strains of religion) represent mainstream thinking today, especially in America.

The tragic stance on the other hand, is based on the assumption that human beings are unchanging. That they have constant natures that are deeply limited and flawed, that cause them to fail in predictable ways (hence the connotation of tragedy). Historically, it has been at least as popular as the idealist stance except during one very exceptional century: the twentieth. Thanks largely due to the global influence of American culture, and the dominance of idealism in America during the twentieth century, the tragic stance has been a minority stance.

“Slightly Evil” of course, like all vaguely pop-Machiavellian philosophies, belongs in the tragic camp.

The common belief in America that Democrats are idealists while Republicans are tragedians, is a fundamental mistake. In America, *all* politics and religion has been idealist for the last century. Hippies and evangelical Christians alike, have been idealists. Main Street middle class

types and hipsters both tend to believe in some variant of the American dream, though they often won't admit it.

Now here is the paradox: idealism believes in change and creates unchanging human beings. Tragedism (to coin a word) believes humans cannot change their fundamental natures, yet believing in it actually transforms humans far more radically than the idealist view.

This isn't a deep metaphysical paradox. It is a superficial semantic and social paradox. While idealism at its best can be very deep indeed, in practice it mostly loses its way in its pursuit of deep "growth" and ends up as superficial adaptation. A group of disenchanted cubicle dwellers may discard their suits and laptops and go form a commune based on vague New Age values, but they will almost certainly take their psychological baggage with them. I am constantly amazed by how such idealists are able to ignore the obvious similarities between the corporate politicking that they have nominally left behind, and the internal dynamics of their own "new" groups with supposedly healthier cultures.

That is why I call it *adaptation*. Idealist models of human change merely help believers conform (often via cosmetic rebellion or deep socialization) to their environment. Nothing changes around them, and deep down, neither do they. Hence the commonly-observed irony: believers in "progress" (of both Republican and Democratic varieties in America) often help maintain the status quo by occupying *stable* marginal positions. The revolution never comes.

I am biased of course, but I find the tragic end of the paradox far more interesting.

The Unreasonable Man Effect

The tragic stance on the other hand, brings about deep change in a roundabout way. If you stubbornly stick to the idea that humans cannot change, then improving your life means changing your environment. As

Shaw noted, “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

The best illustration of this “Unreasonable Man” effect is William Whyte’s portrait of the sociopath-executive who refuses to conform to the *Organization Man* mold. I have quoted this passage elsewhere before:

Of all organization men, the true executive is the one who remains most suspicious of The Organization. If there is one thing that characterizes him, it is a fierce desire to control his own destiny and, deep down, he resents yielding that control to The Organization, no matter how velvety its grip he wants to dominate, not be dominated...

But consider what happens if you behave like this: you trigger deep processes of creative destruction in the environment that turn around and transform you. Unwittingly, you end up being transformed by attempting to transform the world. Unlike the conformist adaptations of the idealists, tragedian change involves real self-destruction in the sense of Nietzsche, before resurrection can happen. You know this if you’ve ever taken on a major, challenging project. Finishing it doesn’t just create the output you had planned on, it transforms you.

Among the major pop-psychology/self-improvement classics, the only one that hints at this process is Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist*, which has at its core a gem of an idea: that seeking the philosopher’s stone to transform base metals into gold ends up transforming you. The protagonist of the book isn’t an angsty, tortured soul looking for personal growth, he is on a mundane quest for literal treasure, like your average entrepreneur in Silicon Valley. The transformation is a side effect.

Resolving the Paradox

So can human beings change or not? I like to think about this question in terms of Lego blocks. We are, each of us, particular accidental constructions made up of a set of blocks. The whole thing can be torn down and rebuilt into a different design, but you can't really do anything to change the building blocks. The building blocks of personality are abstract consequences of the more literal building blocks at the biological level, genes. They constrain, but do not define, who we are or can be.

So yes and no. We can change, and we cannot. The Idealist-Tragedian dichotomy has the same contours as the Nurture-Nature dichotomy. Both are false, both can be dissolved through reframing in terms of constrained design spaces, building blocks and path-dependent expression of the possibilities of that space.

So why do I consider Tragedian change to be deeper? To continue the Lego metaphor. I often find that Idealists are reluctant to tear themselves down. They prefer to only build up. Which means growth must build on what already exists.

Idealists trap themselves into these cul-de-sacs of incremental change partly through life choices and partly through a metaphysical own-goal.

The life choice is simply the act of focusing *directly* on change rather than challenging *external projects*. The idealist goes off on a Zen retreat looking directly for change. The tragedian starts a business or writes a book and then resists and ultimately *accepts* the change as an inevitable consequence. Good or bad, it is a rebirth. That is why you cannot call it “self-improvement.” Tragedian patterns of deeper creative-destructive change are fundamentally risky. A successful book or business may end up sending you into a spiral of drugs and depression, while utter failure may end up getting you to a moment of enlightenment far faster than the earnestly meditating Zen students.

The metaphysical own-goal is much simpler: idealists often elaborate the idea of *perfectability* into a doctrine of *continuously evolving perfection*, which declares that you are perfect as you are, at every point on your path. You can only become *more* perfect (it is revealing that the words “more perfect” occur in the American constitution). This has the effect of making

it impossible for you to backtrack from a given path or admit that something was a “deep” mistake capable of causing real regret, damage or death.

In fact the concept of “mistake” is rendered toothless in idealism through conflation with safe learning in the sense of schooling. “It’s a learning process” is a fine way to view mistakes until a mistake bankrupts, kills or psychologically destroys you.

The Importance of the Tragedian/Unreasonable Man Stance

Adopting the tragedian stance has several consequences (many of them rather harsh). I’ll explore some of these in future issues. But just to get you started on your own, here are a couple of such ideas to mull:

- Idealists revere non-zero-sum “win win” thinking over zero-sum “win-lose” thinking. Tragedians are neutral and objective about both, and pick the framing the suits the situation.
- Idealists revere long-term thinking over short-term. Tragedians focus on the *appropriate* time horizon for a given situation.
- Idealists seek “sustainability” or worse, “sustainable growth.” Tragedians believe both concepts to be fundamentally vacuous.
- Idealists often seek to be kind and end up being unwittingly cruel. Tragedians are often low-empathy sociopaths, but paradoxically end up doing good without meaning to.

Shadowboxing with Evil Twins

Let's tackle a question of the existential "what am I doing with my life?" variety. We'll examine the case of a ribbonfarm reader named Lee.

The background, in brief, is as follows (bold highlights mine):

Lee grew up as a middle child, with an elder and younger sibling, in a high-achieving immigrant Tiger Parent Asian family. Somewhere halfway through college at an Ivy League institution, he decided to rebel. He dropped out and became a social worker in the developing world for a decade, doing very rewarding and fulfilling work and making a real impact on people's lives. At some point, however, he realized he wanted a path with more personal growth and financial stability, so he returned to the US, got himself a master's degree, and switched careers. He now does HR work at a big company. As he approaches his mid-career years, Lee frames his life challenges as follows:

- How to **avoid** (manageable) fits of anxiety related to my career/financial expectations.
- How to find the appropriate **balance** between the professional **aggressiveness** inspired by my goals/abilities/etc. and the **patience** I need in order to get along at work.
- How to determine the appropriate **balance** between **conventional** work activities and **alternative** 'life-hacking' pursuits outside of the workplace.

This is a surprisingly common life-and-career pattern these days, as is the reverse pattern of suddenly quitting a traditional career mid-stream to do something that feels more meaningful, like social work. In fact, the reverse pattern describes my own life pretty well.

There are two ways to read such stories. Both are important, but neither is sufficient by itself.

The Pragmatic Reading

The pragmatic reading makes such scripts seem banal and cliched to the point that it is tempting to laugh at them. They seem like formulas for bad TV movies. Yet, if you're actually *in* such a story, it feels anything but banal, and not just because it happens to be *your* life. There is genuinely more drama in each such story than the superficial appearance might suggest. Many people process such stories purely at the banal level, comparing their stories to others' stories, swapping notes, occasionally stumbling upon an insight or two after the third drink on Boxing Day (see, I knew I could work in a seasonal reference). You can find many such stories in Dan McAdams' excellent book, *The Redemptive Self*. The narratives in the book are primarily useful as data though. They did not strike me as representing particularly insightful or self-aware processing by the people experiencing them.

We naturally default to the pragmatic framing because it feels non-threatening inside our heads, and is also easy to communicate to others. Within the pragmatic version of the narrative, situational details and problems loom large as is clear from Lee's concerns: managing career and financial expectations, goal setting, getting ahead vs. getting along, work-life balance, and so forth.

But in my experience, fixes developed entirely within such situation-specific readings of your narrative tend to be temporary band-aids. You might, for instance, take up a hobby to achieve better work-life balance, and look to local opportunities and friends' recommendations to pick a hobby. You might decide to start a food blog and build an Arduino-based robot simply because that's what others in superficially similar situations seem to be doing. Or move to Bali to do Internet Marketing. Again because that's what a lot of people are doing.

The problem is that such situational readings don't really get at the individual psychology of what is going on, so you get trapped into imitative life scripts that may not work for you. After all two people might experience roughly the same situational narrative and yet end up with entirely different *perceived* quality assessments of their lives. Your journey

from hell to heaven might be the very definition of a fall from heaven to hell for me.

This brings us to what I call the Shadow reading of your life story: a way to make such thoughts more precise.

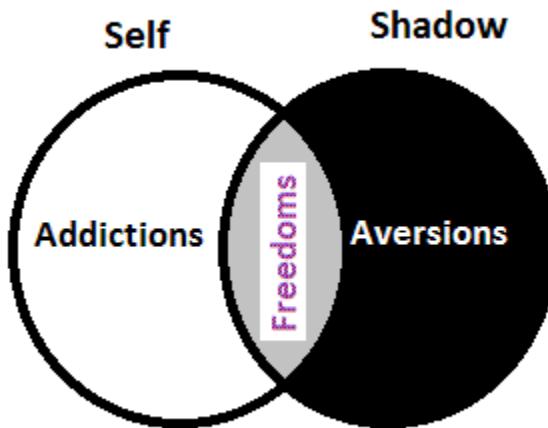
The Shadow Reading

Before I can explain how to create a shadow reading of your own life and how to work with that reading to get to interesting insights and decisions, I'll need to cover some background.

Thanks to some very interesting recent reading and conversations (with fellow blogger Gregory Rader of *On the Spiral* in particular), I recently learned to think in terms of the Jungian concept of a *shadow*. Looking back, without realizing it, I've been thinking in terms of "engage your Jungian shadow" for a very long time, but now that I have learned a precise vocabulary for talking about it, I find that I can think much more clearly about certain problems, and express certain ideas in very succinct ways. For instance, this whole "slightly evil" part of my writing life, which started with my *Gervais Principle* and *Evil Twins* posts, is simply about me sparring with my own shadow. I'll explain in a minute what that means.

Now I am an amateur at this stuff, and I am sure others can explain it much better, but here's the basic idea. Your personality can be understood as comprising two parts: a self and a shadow. The self represents the parts of yourself that you accept, and are attached to. You see those parts primarily as strengths. The shadow represents the parts of yourself that you reject as weaknesses, and have developed an aversion to. It is, for the most part, subconscious or unconscious. You can generally only see your shadow by projecting it onto external realities. Especially other *people*. These people are, at a first approximation, the ones who feel like your evil twins: what is in your shadow is in their conscious self, and vice-versa. Your shadow persona manifests itself in your own behavior only under conditions of either extreme stress, or extreme relaxation.

Your self and shadow are not independent, but overlap. The intersection consists of those parts of yourself where you have engaged your shadow consciously. These are the parts that you understand neither as strengths, nor weaknesses, but simply elements of your true nature. So they actually represent your *freedoms*. The parts outside the intersection are *addictions* and *aversions* respectively, which enslave you to greater or lesser degrees. Here's a Venn diagram representation.



In this very simple model, your life journey can be described in a very succinct way: it is about integrating self and shadow, and getting the overlap zone to grow and cover your whole personality. If you want to figure out a crude map of your own self and shadow make-up, go to the Wikipedia article for your Myers-Briggs personality type and scroll down to the part that says “cognitive functions.” The first four functions represent your self, and the last four are your shadow functions. Within the Myers-Briggs model of Jungian archetypes, everybody is just a particular ordering of these eight functions (with some constraints, so you only get 16 types rather than 8-factorial types).

Check out your list before you proceed. I am willing to bet you'll recognize how you frame the first four in positive ways as strengths. If you're past 30, chances are you'll also have some insight into how you relate to your shadow functions.

The shadow reading of stories like Lee's is very simple: sudden and dramatic career switches are often a case of moving from self-work to shadow-work or vice-versa. You either get so stressed out by working with your shadow personality (recall that it takes stress or relaxation to bring out shadow traits, and usually it is stress) that you flee towards self-expression. Or you find that purely indulging your self has costs that require you to muster up courage and tackle your shadow. That's why the phrases *self-expression* and *going over to the dark side* are so often used to describe such career transitions.

So what can we do with this crude model? We can shadow-box. Instead of big, sudden career shifts, we can work with self and shadow in more fine-grained, and less drastic ways, continuously.

Shadow Boxing with Your Evil Twins

What do I mean by shadow boxing?

As a simple example, I am a Myers-Briggs INTP. The Jungian cognitive function known as *extroverted feeling* is fourth on the list for me, so it is on the cusp between self and shadow, and an Achilles heel that I am aware of. It manifests as conflict avoidance and harmony-seeking in social situations. I don't like parties or scenes or any situation where shared emotions run high, be they positive or negative. I rationalize this trait to myself as a strength, "I am good at peace-making." But really, what I do is calm down group situations that upset me, even when it might be productive to let a "scene" unfold.

I recognized this about 12 years ago unconsciously, and deliberately started to resist the "peacemaking" temptation. I taught myself to gradually get more comfortable in situations of overt conflict, with people yelling and screaming. This made me less susceptible to being manipulated by people who rely on creating scenes for leverage. I wouldn't say I am entirely comfortable with my shadow in this department yet. I still can't yell and scream and create a scene myself. I still don't like raucous dance parties or

nightclubs. But I can now ride out storms created by others, without attempting to pour oil on the troubled waters. I can also get aggressive on occasion, in controlled ways. For short periods, I can even get on an ideological high horse and browbeat people the way Bill O'Reilly does (an American right-wing talk show host known for bullying people he interviews). It feels so toxic though, that I have to quit very quickly.

Where is the “evil” bit here?

Chances are, in your personal processing approach, shadow behaviors that you recognize in others appear almost as the definition of evil to you. I do perceive people who behave in uncivil ways, or create disharmony through inconsiderate behavior, as being morally objectionable, not just a practical nuisance to deal with.

On the other hand, my evil twins are typically people who are very comfortable with overt conflict and morally object to something I am good at: managing perceptions and realities on separate tracks (which they view as the moral sin of lacking “authenticity”). The trait they prize as a strength (“authenticity”) can of course, equally well be viewed as naivete and incompetence at a certain class of useful behaviors (deception of all varieties, from telling a kid Santa Claus is real, to telling a sick person things that will make them feel better even if untrue, to pulling a fast one on adversaries).

So to truly explore your shadow, yes, you need to tiptoe into behavioral territories that feel slightly evil *to you*. This is dangerous business.

One good safety belt you can wear is to actually engage real evil twins rather than an abstract understanding of your own shadow. If you can find people who seem like evil twins in terms of the values they model through their behaviors, but are generally viewed by a broader population as valuable people, engaging them helps you understand your shadow, and limits the dangers. For me, one such evil twin is the author Nicholas Nassim Taleb. Reading his new book *Antifragile* is almost physically painful for me. I have to deliberately put on what I call my evil twin filter to get value out of the book (which certainly does contain some good ideas and insights).

But I don't think I could stand a face-to-face meeting with the guy. He probably couldn't stand me either: I am practically the definition of everything he appears to hate, even though we think about very similar things and reach very similar conclusions (that's the "twin" part). I suspect if the opportunity arose, I'd simply shake hands, exchange a couple of civil pleasantries, and walk away.

Face-to-face interpersonal interactions with evil twins can be pretty stressful, so if you decide to try *that*, you need to choose people who are only "slightly evil twins," so to speak. A substantive encounter with a full-blown evil twin can be so toxic that it takes years to get over it. Worse, if you *fail* to get over it, the encounter can grow into a deeply resentful "us vs. them" philosophy of life, built entirely on top of one encounter.

I've *almost* been down that road. Twice. Each time, thankfully, I stopped myself in time, retreated, and went down healthier paths.

But slightly evil twins are good for you. In fact, this realization helped me understand my consulting practice in a whole new light. Often what I do is simply serve as a slightly evil sparring partner for somebody who is processing a business problem that requires grappling with shadow traits. I cannot do this for everybody obviously, only with people who are in my own slightly evil zone. But the more the intersection on my self-shadow Venn diagram grows, the more people I find I can help.

Sparring with a slightly evil twin, like all practical actions, happens in the banal world rather than the shadow world.

Translating the Shadowy to the Banal

To truly realize the power of shadow boxing though, you have to translate the intense drama of your private life back into the banal situational script. Because that's where the action actually unfolds. Ultimately, you have to manifest your abstract decisions (such as "curb extroverted feeling") in concrete settings. You have to pick friends and hobbies. You have to angle

for promotions. You have to pick some projects and drop other projects. You have to decide how to behave at specific meetings or parties where specific things are happening. You have to pick authors to read.

For people like me, this is the boring and tedious part. For people like my evil twins, who prefer situated realities to abstracted ones, I suspect it is the interesting part.

This translation is a *problem-solving skill*. Your ability to successfully solve situational problems by translating them to and from the shadow world is what shows that you haven't just acquired a vocabulary, but a full-blown narrative analysis and enactment language.

For starters, try something simple, like picking a new hobby by accessing your shadow.

Here's an example. I've long wanted to get myself a pair of binoculars for bird and ship-watching. But I never got around to it, partly because I never thought through the psychology behind my attraction to the hobby, and appropriately prioritized it.

Now with my new-found shadow analysis lens, I think I understand the impulse. The function known as *extroverted sensing* (basically the ability to pay attention to external sensory detail) is a deep shadow function for me (something that is seventh on my list of eight functions, which is why I am not a graphic designer). But when I am very relaxed, I enjoy exercising that function. As a kid in high school, I got into amateur astronomy partly because the subject interested me (a self-expression motive), but mainly because the physical act of quietly observing the night sky was very relaxing to me (a shadow-expression motive).

Here in Seattle, where I now live, the night sky is visible perhaps two nights in a year, but there is plenty to observe out on the water: bird life, ships, waterfront activities. So I finally got myself a pair of binoculars last week, and went on my first birding walk along the waterfront yesterday. It was very satisfying. You might want to apply that heuristic to your last-minute gift-giving this year, if you happen to know the Myers-Briggs type of your giftees. But be careful. Don't accidentally give them a shadow-

based stressor instead of a shadow-based relaxant. I made this mistake once and the person in question has disliked me ever since.

And getting back to Lee's life situation problem, I only have one simple suggestion: he needs to re-narrate his situation in self/shadow ways, and then ask the question of what to do in terms of integrating the two.

Rousseau vs. Hobbes Redux

Suppose you are a well-known gunslinger in the lawless Wild West, widely regarded as a powerful but benevolent and enlightened being who can draw faster than anybody else, but does not crave worldly things. Everybody knows you don't interfere with ordinary human affairs or use your powers directly to influence events. You only strive to create peace and harmony through indirect means.

One day you come across a situation that is just short of a Mexican stand-off: two guys are facing each other. There is a sack of gold between them, that they found simultaneously. Both are unarmed, but clearly preparing to start a fist-fight over the gold. It is not clear *a priori* which of the two is stronger, but both are prepared to risk injury to find out.

You come up with two options that you think might lead to a peaceful and harmonious resolution of the standoff:

- You could toss a gun to each, creating a true Mexican stand-off, and hope that the escalated cost of the conflict (risking death rather than mere injury) encourages the two to negotiate a peaceful sharing of the gold.
- Or you could appeal to their noble and selfless instincts and get them to share the treasure, trusting that neither really wants to fight if he can avoid it.

What would you do? Would the size of the bag of gold affect your answer?

Okay, this is a very contrived situation, but it is the simplest one I could come up with to illustrate two fundamentally opposed axioms about the nature of human beings. These axioms relate to a thought experiment in political science known as “man in the state of nature,” an imagined original human condition that is assumed to have existed before civil society took root. This original condition is presumed to be egalitarian. The civil society that emerges from this condition is decidedly non-egalitarian,

but provides certain benefits to all. How does this happen, conceptually? Is it good or bad for humanity, overall, that we left the State of Nature?

Thomas Hobbes made a fundamentally pessimistic assumption: that humans in this state of nature are fundamentally competitive, violent and corruptible (tending to become more evil or wicked if left to themselves). For Hobbes, evil is natural, good is an aberration. Hobbes' is a tragic view of the human condition.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the other hand made a fundamentally optimistic assumption: that humans in the natural state are fundamentally harmony-loving, cooperative and perfectible (tending to become more good and noble, left to themselves). For Rousseau, good is natural and evil is an aberration. Rousseau's is an idealist view of the human condition.

Both Hobbes (1588-1679) and Rousseau (1712-1778) were channeling the pre-Darwinian intellectual environment of their times, the early period of modern state formation after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. The two are evil twins,¹¹ and end up telling very similar stories about how political order emerges, but provide very different interpretations, and very different prescriptions about how to govern. Today's conservatives are intellectual descendants of Hobbes, while today's progressives are descendants of Rousseau. Sadly, both lineages have gotten increasingly dumb. What was once a powerful idealist-tragic dialectic is today an ossified detente that produces no political innovation. Each intellectual tradition has become inbred and anti-intellectual. The State of Nature experiment has run its course and ended up on a civilized plateau.

Returning to my Mexican stand-off question, you could say that Hobbes would toss a gun to each, while Rousseau would try appealing to higher instincts (modern politicians would argue about what to do until it was too late to do anything).

Today, if we had to reconstruct the ideas of Hobbes and Rousseau, we would abandon good and evil and turn to evolutionary biology. Francis Fukuyama does precisely that in his excellent new book, *The Origins of Political Order*. Turns out, the key change required is to think of extended kinship groups and tribes as the fundamental units among which egalitarian

conditions reign. So “kin-groups in the state of nature” or “tribes in the state of nature” is a more accurate description of the likely conditions from which civil society emerged. Both Hobbes and Rousseau assumed the individual as the right unit of analysis. Turns out they were wrong. The modern notion of individualized person-hood did not really emerge till around the 13th century, in England. So as an approximation of real history, the thought experiment has the wrong units.

But overall the Hobbes/Rousseau foundational pair of assumptions, appropriately adapted to reflect the ideas of evolutionary psychology and generalized to basic units other than individuals, still applies.

So what determines which aspect of our natures is dominant? Today a rather naive belief is doing the rounds that whether we compete or cooperate depends on whether we believe in scarcity or abundance. In terms of our hypothetical Wild West situation, there are those who believe that the size of the sack of gold matters. It makes sense on the surface. If the bag of gold were sufficiently huge, there would be no point fighting over it. There would be enough to make both gunslingers rich beyond their wildest dreams.

But as both Hobbes and Rousseau recognized, abundance/scarcity is only part of the story. Above a certain minimum size, the bag of gold is partly just an excuse for engaging in a fight for *recognition*. Each party has an urge to force the other to recognize him as worthy, via submission (an inherently quixotic urge, since recognition from a defeated adversary is devalued by virtue of the defeat). Ceding the gold would be a mark of such submission. Modern identity politics is often about recognition-seeking rather than a fight over resources, with or without guns.

For Hobbes (and Hegel, and Nietzsche and Fukuyama) this struggle for recognition is a necessary and unalterable aspect of human nature, while for Rousseau and his idealist descendants, it is an unnecessary pathology that can be cast by the wayside on humanity’s quest for perfection.

I have oversimplified a lot of key ideas here, but if you want to develop a more nuanced understanding of the Hobbes/Rousseau tragic/idealist dichotomy, I recommend two key texts: the show *Deadwood*, which was

written specifically to tell a Hobbesian story, and *The Dark Knight*, which was written to capture a Rousseauish story. In the latter, despite the Joker's best efforts to prove a Hobbesian theory of humanness, a Rousseauish outcome is achieved. You could also read Hobbes and Rousseau in the original of course (personally, I've only read second-hand summaries and sampled the originals).

I'll conclude with one thought to justify the "redux" in the title. Even though the major human political story among nations has ended in a vapid detente of sorts, a new Hobbes vs. Rousseau experiment is starting today – on the Internet. This one is in fact closer to the original thought experiment, since individuals have never been more powerful in relation to kinship groups, tribes and states. The Internet is also more of a blank political canvas compared to the physical Earth, with its continents, mountain ranges and oceans.

So ask yourself: would you bet on Hobbesian or Rousseauian dynamics to better explain the evolution of the virtual world?

Preparing to Play

Status 101

Status is a big and foundational subject. Fortunately, the thin slice of it that we need to bootstrap Slightly Evil behaviors is of manageable complexity.

This is the breakthrough question: “how do I know what status to play in a given situation?” If you haven’t asked this question, it is *very* difficult for me or anyone else to teach you anything about status. Until you ask this question, you are in a locked-status mode, where the status you feel is in a predictable and unchanging relationship to the status you play. You cannot “play” it because you don’t have control. Your status behaviors are in firmware rather than consciously programmable software.

Here’s a quick and dirty conceptual framework to help you understand “locked status.” Don’t push this too far, since I’ve simplified a lot of things to fit the 101 level treatment, but it is a handy starter model.

Felt status, played status and perceived status have almost nothing to do with each other at a fundamental level. Any relationships among these three variables are therefore quite arbitrary. A beggar, waiter or doorman can feel and play high status, while being perceived as low status. A CEO may constantly and anxiously seek approval in cringe-inducing ways (felt and played low, perceived high). Let’s ignore “perceived” for now and focus on felt and played status, since these are the ones you control. There are four status patterns: feeling low, playing low (LL), feeling low, playing high (LH), feeling high, playing low (HL), feeling high, playing high (HH). If the root cause of the fixedness is intrinsic and psychological, the same stable pattern will appear in *all* situations. This is absolute fixedness: you adopt the same pattern towards all. If the root cause is extrinsic and social-psychological, you will use a different pattern based on perceived relative status, which is the difference between the perceived status of the other, and your felt status. Both absolute and relative personalities are predictable. You just need more data to model relative personalities.

You can easily detect the 4 patterns, but it takes deeper analysis to figure out whether you are seeing an absolute or relative use of the pattern. The classic sign of LH, for instance, is “being rude to waiters.” Somebody who is feeling low, but playing high will feel the need to “prove” the played status by lording it over somebody nominally lower, who is too constrained by situational rules to bite back effectively. The reason this is particularly useful to look for in a date or an interviewee is that those are situations that commonly bring out LH patterns.

LL might seem odd: why would *anyone* want to act low status without manipulative intent or a payoff? Turns out, for some people, life is so messed up that constantly validating an “I suck” life position, and enjoying moments of perverse vindication, is easier than doing something about it. This is normally done through game playing (in the sense of Berne’s *Games People Play*). A simple-to-detect symptom is the inability to graciously accept a compliment: “Your lasagna turned out great!” “Oh, it’s a little too salty.” Be careful to tease individual LL positions apart from cultural norms though, since self-deprecation in the face of a compliment is considered polite behavior in many cultures.

HL is also easy to detect; the classic sign is what we normally perceive as “gracious” behavior, where someone is considerate, polite, scrupulously nice, and on the lookout for every chance to make you feel good. But it still feels like “reverse flattery” or *noblesse oblige* because they are perceived high, and typically don’t intend to *truly* act low in completely convincing ways (Dicken’s Uriah Heep is a notable exception). Opening a door for someone else is a symbolically a low status thing to do, but can be an effective HL behavior if done the right way (door opening is probably the *e. coli* of status science; I could write a whole essay just about that. Maybe I will at some point).

True HH is actually the rarest type. Typically only spoilt children and leaders/emperors in ceremonial situations will play HH. Beggars will sometimes act HH (a case of “nowhere to go but up.” If they can make you feel “low” by pushing buttons, they win psychologically, whether or not you give them money). Doormen,^{**} bouncers, waiters and others who enjoy

derived high status through a uniform (representing someone else or a group with true high status) can also act HH.

To tell scope, there isn't really an easy formula. You have to observe the same person's behavior across multiple situations, and their interactions with many others of varied relative status.

Now, here's why all this is important. Status is a variable whose importance is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you gravitate to preferred locked-status patterns, then you will expend energy preserving those patterns. You can be manipulated. Status matters if it matters.

Conversely, if status doesn't matter to you, it becomes available to you as a situational control variable when dealing with those to whom status *does* matter. We all start out in a locked-status mode, but if you start breaking locked felt-played patterns then a curious thing happens: felt status of any sort weakens. Turns out felt status needs the nourishment of being hooked to a projected (and perceived-as-hoped and validated) status in order to survive. If you spend enough years breaking patterns in unpredictable ways, felt status starts to vanish altogether, leaving a sort of "status vacuum" inside you. The designated part of firmware dedicated to status seems to decay. The variable can nearly completely vanish. I suspect this happens to really good actors, like William H. Macy, who play a large status spectrum convincingly. This is one reason I don't consider Denzel Washington a good actor: he never seems to play convincing low-status roles.

When two status-vacuum people meet, they typically recognize each other and abandon status-based manipulation altogether and spar with other weapons.

There is a subtle failure mode here: if you break locked patterns in predictable ways, you simply lock in new patterns. I knew a guy who figured all this stuff out, but then got hooked on "pushing buttons" and enjoying the reactions. That reinforced a "felt high" pattern rather than shriveling felt status to a vacuum. He could be manipulated by hooking his button-pushing instincts. The best way to break patterns in random ways is simply to play situations in ways that suit your situational objectives. Your

objectives and the related optimal patterns, will generally be in a random relationship to any locked patterns.

Now, on to the opening question: what status should you play in a given situation? Depends on what you want out of the situation, doesn't it? What do you want the other person to do?

Whatever you want, getting it involves correctly adapting to their predictable status behaviors. You can threaten their projected status, in which case they'll move to defend it. You can validate it, in which case they'll move to express gratitude or ignore you. You can combine the two moves by first attacking and then validating. This is the familiar "give people a way to save face" sequence.

Be careful of one thing though—how they react to your machinations depends on the way they perceive your status. You want to pick a position relative to the one they want to hold on to. Which side, and how far above or below, depends on whether you want to attack or validate, and how. You can't shift too much because locked-status people can't parse status-shifters. You'll just evoke suspicion, distrust or confusion. Pick a good position and stick to it for the situation; shifting status in mid-situation is not a 101 level skill. Both distance and sign matter. For instance, if you want to validate the other's status via compliments, you can't be too far below (flattery won't be valued) or too far above (you risk seeming patronizing). And you also have to pick a position you can credibly hold given the status signs that are important to the other. If the other person is only capable of seeing and reacting to how you are dressed, you can't do a whole lot if you happen to be dressed like a slob. At least, not at 101 skill levels.

How important is it to play status right? Overwhelmingly important. You can do everything else right and play status wrong and you'll fail. You need to constantly practice status playing skills, and even then the game gets tougher all the time as you meet more complicated people, in more demanding situations. You will play things wrong often, so you need to spread risk over multiple situations and people.

Can you choose not to play? Yes, if you find a group of people whose locked-status patterns are complementary to yours (either via co-dependent

game-playing patterns or more productive patterns), and stay within that group, and within a small universe of situations, as much as you can. If your life involves constantly meeting all sorts of new people, in unfamiliar situations, and getting all sorts of different things from them, you don't have a choice. Play status or crash. Even if you aren't being played yourself, the mere randomness of complementary/toxic status collisions with a changing cast of locked-status people will eventually make you crash. The unmanaged, baseline "complementary" hit rate will be too low.

Hope that's enough to get you started, for those of you who needed this primer. One warning. If you decide to go down this path, there is no turning back. Once your status firmware starts to shrivel, you can't easily re-invigorate it. Being a status-player is also not an easy thing to hide in the long term, so you *will* be known for what you are, by people you interact with a lot. The best way to manage this perception is to openly acknowledge it and make sure your underlying *values* are understood and accepted by others. If you don't make that clear, you'll end up being viewed as an opportunistic, two-faced politician, and *that* perception is highly dangerous. Project your values clearly, and you'll come across as "worldly wise," a much safer perception.

Should You Show Your True Colors?

There are two types of movie villains, the kind that starts out obviously evil from minute one, and the bad guy who “shows his true colors” at some pivotal scene. Even if you are only slightly evil, you need to pick one of these two styles; obvious wolf, or wolf in sheep’s clothing? I recommend “obvious wolf,” but done intelligently.

Pretending to be all sweet and nice usually backfires badly in the long term, because long-term acting is hard, painful and ultimately pointless, and when you are unmasked (as you ultimately will be),

the repercussions are awful, even if your unmasked character isn’t particularly bad. The mere fact that you put on a show is a hanging crime, socially.

But if you are afraid that “showing your true colors” limits your influence, you are mistaken. Done right, it actually amplifies influence. Here’s a little story (possibly apocryphal) I once heard, that illustrates the point.

On the sets of *The Hunt for Red October* one day, Sean Connery lost it. He exploded at some unfortunate stage hand for a trivial reason; the whole unit was on edge. That’s when they shot the scene when Sean Connery’s character first strides onto the command deck. All the other actors tensed up. Connery himself was calm and relaxed.

Sean Connery actually lost his temper on purpose. That way he got the *other* actors to act in a way that made *his* presence seem a lot more commanding. At some point, you too have probably been around someone influential who is known to have an explosive temper. Everyone walks around on eggshells, people watch what they say, and there is tension in the air.

Now, I don’t know if that story is true, but I’ve seen enough similar episodes in real life to extract a general lesson. To wield influence, it pays to appear predictable in very simple ways around others. Fly your true colors high. For most of us on the slightly evil path, this is a

counterintuitive idea. We've all learned, through observation and practice, that it pays

to be either a low reactor, or that it pays to become whatever the situation demands, like the boggarts in Harry Potter novels. Expressing "your true self" is for naive, self-absorbed and self-indulgent idiots, right?

Not quite. Trying to be yourself and expressing your true personality in every situation certainly is a very adolescent thing to do. Expressing yourself *completely* is downright childish. That amounts to publishing all your buttons for anybody to push. But if you identify the right, simple subset of your most natural behaviors, and become very predictable to specific groups of people, you will be vastly more effective. What kind of behaviors should you deliberately publish? The ones others are afraid of triggering. In other words, the only buttons worth publishing are the ones others are afraid to push. Publishing buttons that others want to push leads to being manipulated, flattered or worst of all, an invitation to a co-dependent, mutual-reward-button-pushing loop.

Temper is the most obvious one, but it is a pretty blunt instrument. You can also gain a reputation for predictably asking specific types of questions, such as "do you have data to back that up?" and a reputation for mercilessly skewering people who don't respond the right way. Do it once or twice, and people get the message. So long as it is a self-aware kind of predictability, you will also be able to over-ride your own default published responses on occasion if necessary.

Small and Honest Moves

How do you know your car mechanic isn't over-charging you? How do you know your doctor isn't ordering unnecessary tests and procedures?

Such situations are what economists call “principal-agent problems.” Basically, these are asymmetric situations where the party you are paying for a service is also the knowledgeable party who can determine what services are actually necessary, and how much to charge. The agent has a strong incentive to cheat the principal by padding the bills, either by doing, or pretending to do, unnecessary extra work. Such cheating is rife, especially in car repair. More than once I've doubtfully forked over money for work I suspected was unnecessary. Once, I actually caught an extra listed service, and when I pointed it out, the mechanic's reaction made it clear that it wasn't an accident. He blustered, but it was clear he'd tried padding the bill, assuming I was more ignorant than I actually was.

Much advice is often offered to principals on how to deal with the problem, but I'll offer you a slightly evil tip: how to win the trust of a suspicious principal if you are an agent.

A month or so ago, my car developed a slow oil leak. Since I'd recently driven over a big rock that hit my under-carriage, I was worried there might be some serious and expensive damage to my transmission. I mentioned the incident as a possible cause while dropping the car off, and I expect my anxiety over a potentially huge bill must have been evident. When it comes to car mechanics, I don't bother with a poker face. After all, these guys get to read dozens of customer faces every day while you and I only dance with auto mechanics a couple of times a year.

To my pleasant surprise, when I picked up the car, the mechanic told me he was just charging me for an oil change. The problem was an old and cracked oil pan cap (if I remember his words correctly), a cheap part he replaced for free. So I got a \$35 bill where I had mentally been preparing for something in the hundreds or thousands.

This is what I call a small, honest act. He could easily have met my anxious expectations and done unnecessary and expensive repairs.

In this case, I believe the small, honest act was part of an overall honest operation. But it immediately struck me that such moves can be used by an unscrupulous agent to lull a suspicious principal into a false sense of security. An agent can easily gain trust with small, honest moves, and then make out like a bandit later when a better opportunity presents itself.

Most uses of this tactic I can think of would be outright evil rather than slightly evil, so the main value in knowing the trick is to guard against it. But I suspect there are probably good slightly evil cases where you can use the tactic and still sleep at night. Especially if the principal is a jerk who deserves it. A fictional example is Andy DuFresne's actions in the *Shawshank Redemption*. I won't spoil it for you if you haven't yet seen it.

The First Day in Prison

I hope you never do anything that sends you to prison, but there are interesting things to be learned from prison culture. One of my favorite prison ideas is the best known one: you should beat somebody up on your first day in prison. Otherwise, so prison-lore has it, things that happen to you will be even nastier than they need to be.

Like many, I believe that all organizations are psychic prisons. Unlike most, I also believe that apparently open and non-institutional social systems or networks are *also* psychic prisons. There is a saying in the modern cult of happiness that “happiness is other people.” I’d add to that, “prison is other people.”

So you should expect to see some variant of the “beat somebody up on your first day” dynamic in most social contexts. Parties, blogosphere niches, Facebook groups, soccer games: every kind of social context has certain prison-like elements.

In regular workplaces, opportunities come up regularly because the moment you decide to do something significant, you’ll run into opposition.

There are three ways of dealing with opposition.

The recommended and stupid way is to directly engage it in a cooperative spirit. This never works unless there is genuinely some sort of misunderstanding that can be easily clarified. This is the well-known “death by consensus seeking” phenomenon where you try far too hard to make everybody happy and end up slowing down your effort to a glacial pace. You also burden it with so much crud put in to please others, it will likely die under the weight of unreasonable expectations if it ever gets through. Consensus-building has its place in the slightly evil playbook, but it is rarely a useful obstacle-avoidance technique.

The smart way is to acknowledge the reality of true conflict and judiciously decide, for each obstacle, whether to go through it or around it.

Going through means confronting somebody openly and trying to either win them over to your side without conceding much in return, or getting a more powerful decision-maker to rule in your favor. Going around means picking from among your favorite slightly evil moves in the playbook, such as misdirection, distraction, pre-emptive neutralization before they know what you are up to, sidelining, flattery, stealth, divide-and-conquer, momentum judo (accelerating their efforts to failure rather than resisting them) and strategic leaks.

I almost never go through, and most effective people I've met also never go through. Going around is generally cheaper and less damaging.

But there is one situation where going through is useful, even if you would normally judge the situation to be a go-around situation. This is when you are new to a place. Plowing through an element of opposition demonstrates a willingness to fight when necessary, force of will and social intelligence in navigating status hierarchies. In other words, you have to make an example of some unfortunate opponent.

But this only works if you pick the right target and demonstrate “going around” behaviors and consensus-seeking behaviors in parallel (to show your competence at all the plays is to make sure you don’t get labeled a bull in the china shop who only knows how to go through).

This means you must generally pick on someone nominally bigger than you (older, bigger paycheck, nicer title, more successful track record) who isn’t particularly well-liked or connected. But not so much bigger that open conflict would be viewed as unhealthy for the *organization*, even if the specific target is viewed as deserving of a beat-down. In other words, you have to set up and win an *underdog* fight, where you’re not too much of an underdog. You must also anticipate and plan for neutralizing collateral damage, and make sure the right audience is watching. Be careful not to take on staff bureaucrats. “Going through” is almost never the right strategy when dealing with staff. You must pick somebody with line responsibilities.

Lastly, you shouldn’t be the one to start the fight. You should wait for an excuse, a legitimate provocation. Ideally you should pick as your excuse an instance of a pattern of behavior that everybody objects to already. Email is

often the perfect medium for such skirmishes. So a good strategy is to wait for a provocation over email, and then produce a calibrated over-reaction. Be careful *not* to rope in the people you expect to act as judges on your side: you need to show such judges that you can handle confrontation unaided and that impressing them isn't really the point.

And make sure you pick weapons you know how to use. Email is a good medium, but if you suck at email-fu and the art of delivering civil and understated surgical strikes with words, it would be very dumb indeed to pick email.

Following the Rules

Let's steal an idea from the playbook of the labor movement: following the rules.

How much do you think depends on trust, initiative and good faith, for things to run smoothly in a business? Or to turn the question on its head, how intentionally evil do you actually have to be, to disrupt business operations? Do you need to break rules to mess things up?

Turns out, the answer is not even "slightly evil," let alone "outright evil." All you have to do is play by the rules. EXACTLY by the rules.

Playing exactly by the rules is a powerful form of industrial collective action known as "work to rule,"¹¹ in which workers stick religiously to their job descriptions, defined policies and procedures. You don't stop work. You don't deliberately slow down. You don't try extra-hard to be incompetent or make errors. You don't even indulge in creative passive-aggressive obstruction.

You just follow the rules.

And as the history of the labor movement shows, it is often enough to bring things to a standstill.

The reason this works is that under normal circumstances, employers and employees alike conspire to maintain the fiction that a corporation is a set of defined, rational roles that are filled by people with acceptable levels of skill, executing rational policies and procedures that are sufficient to get things done and turn a profit.

In practice, nothing would *ever* get done if everybody did this. The rules aren't a minimum definition of the profit-making business of a corporation. They are well below the minimum. Even disengaged minimum-effort types ("losers" in the Gervais Principle¹² sense) do more than this under normal circumstances.

The effectiveness of “work to rule” methods underlines the extent to which workers must normally improvise, bend, break, extend, and work around formal roles and rules to keep a business running. It also explains why petty bureaucrats (the “clueless” in the GP sense) are basically parasites, because they lack the creativity to go beyond roles and rules in productive ways. They are effectively (and usually without any malicious intent) in “work to rule” mode all the time, and only earn their keep during events when others use them as pawns. Michael on *The Office* is worse than this, since he *does* go beyond roles and rules, but in ways that make things worse (for example, trying ham-handed conflict resolution that increases conflict, or attempting to boost morale in ways that actually lower it).

The dynamics behind “work to rule” explain why the following are among the most dangerous threats (intended or unintended) a worker can make:

- “Not in my job description.”
- “I am just following the rules.”
- “Our policy is...”
- “We are not allowed to work on weekends.”
- “I am not authorized to do that.”
- “I don’t know what the policy is on that, I’ll have to ask my manager.”

The last one is particularly good at choking corporations. Since there is so much that is undefined, the default rule kicks in: if you don’t know, defer to your boss. If enough people resort to that rule often enough, the boss will get choked.

Rules are most often designed to protect and insure rather than enable and create. The only time best-faith people bring up the rules is if their protections are being threatened by unreasonable demands, or they are being asked to take on unreasonable risks. If these lines are trotted out at any other time, you have a micro-level “work to rule” situation.

The *Yes Minister* series is an extreme example. It showcases roles and rules that go way beyond the ones in private corporations; they are actually *designed* to slow things down.

These dynamics also explain why, outside of collective action situations, sticking to the rules is one of the easiest ways to block, slow down or disrupt things others are trying to do, that you disagree with. If you can't sustain an overt battle over something, don't fight; merely execute strictly according to the rules. Due diligence is a powerful weapon.

For someone on the receiving end of this kind of action, a response is very difficult, since you can't be easily fired or disciplined for following the rules. Disciplinary or punitive action will have to be based on less defensible notions like "bad attitude." This is another driver, besides big macro-economic ones, why layoffs are such a popular mechanism: you don't need reasons.

These dynamics can also work *for* you if you are trying to increase productivity in a team rather than block things. You need to build trust and goodwill by demonstrating a willingness to protect a "sphere of improvisation" for your reports: a safe zone where you'll let them operate slightly beyond the roles and rules, in order to get things done, and *accept the blame and responsibility*. In other words, give others the benefits of going beyond the rules, while taking on the risks. If your team can't escape certain consequences when things go wrong, by saying "my manager said it was okay," you are not doing enough for them.

Observation

An Easy Way to Read People

Confirmation bias is the tendency of human beings to preferentially seek out information that confirms their existing beliefs. This can actually be a *good* thing. But we'll worry about the good and bad of it some other day. Today, I want to point out a fairly obvious inference from this that you may not have paid much attention to: one of the easiest ways to figure someone out is to look at the information they choose to consume.

Let me share another pearl of wisdom from the *Yes, Minister* book, and *Yes, Prime Minister* series that illustrates this point. In the episode, *A Conflict of Interest*, for once the clueless Jim Hacker knows more about something than his sociopath Permanent Secretary, Humphrey Appleby. Here's a brilliant bit:

“With respect, Prime Minister,” replied Humphrey impertinently,...
“The only way to understand newspapers is to remember that they pander to their readers’ prejudices.”

Humphrey knows nothing about newspapers. He's a Civil Servant. I'm a politician, I know all about them. I have to. They can make or break me. I know exactly who reads them. *The Times* is read by the people who run the country. The *Daily Mirror* is read by the people who think they run the country. *The Guardian* is read by the people who think they ought to run the country. *The Morning Star* is read by the people who think the country ought to be run by another country. *The Independent* is read by people who don't know who runs the country but are sure they're doing it wrong. The *Daily Mail* is read by the wives of the people who run the country. The *Financial Times* is read by the people who own the country. The *Daily Express* is read by the people who think the country ought to be run the way it used to be run. The *Daily Telegraph* is read by the people who still think it *is* their country. And the *Sun*'s readers don't care who runs the country providing she has big tits.

This is actually scarily accurate. And Hacker is right. While both he and Appleby understand the principle that newspapers pander to their readers' prejudices, only Hacker has realized the importance and implications of the principle.

You are likely better at this game than you know. If you are American, test yourself right now: who reads the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal* and *Utne Reader*? What sort of person likes Ayn Rand? If I told you someone really loves the *Lord of the Rings*, Robert Jordan novels and the History Channel, what image comes to your mind? If you are not American, pick your own examples.

Examine your own reading tastes, and the books you quote most often. How do you think you appear to others?

This is not blatant stereotyping, it is blatant *archetyping*. A subtly different (and morally more defensible) approach to typecasting people. Sure you'll go wrong sometimes, but you'll be right more often. Drawing conclusions from people's reading (or TV watching) tastes is one of the most robust ways to read people. It is really hard to fake your personality on this front. You can dress differently on occasion, and adopt various sorts of convincing mannerisms and body language to project certain personalities. But it is really hard to talk convincingly about books, television shows and ideas you know little about. If somebody watches a lot *E!* and *TMZ*, but pretends in a job interview that they watch a lot of History Channel and read biographies, it is easy enough to ask them to talk about shows/books they've recently watched/read. Even if you haven't watched/read them, you'll be able to tell whether they are faking very easily.

Most people are far too cautious about making such judgments out of a sense of political correctness. Don't be. The more you use this tactic, the better you'll get at it. So don't feel guilty about doing this. Go ahead and use the tactic and boldly jump to conclusions. Be prepared to self-correct if necessary.

Candor, Cursing and Clarity

Many newbie slightly evil types obsess about lying and lie detection. Seeing deceit everywhere, and preparing to battle a world based on lies, helps bolster a romantic self-image of “gritty realist in a tough world which eats innocents alive.” This is dumb for two reasons.

First, lying and lie-detection are extremely non-trivial disciplines. To lie at a level that can fool experts who are used to being lied to (such as cops or polygraph machines), or to lie-detect at that skill level, takes years of practice. Acquiring either skill is a waste of time if you are basically honest and aren’t in law enforcement or in the spy business. In the everyday world, both lying and lie-detection skills are much weaker, and your current skill level will probably do. Investing more in those skills is like buying assault rifles and barricading yourself in your home in a dull, safe suburban neighborhood with no crime. A waste of time and money.

Second, in case you hadn’t noticed, very few well-adjusted people (“well-adjusted” is not a compliment in my book) lie outright about anything consequential. The risk of being caught out in a lie is too high. They usually mumble, talk in circles, avoid certain subjects, act evasive, deflect or equivocate. All these behaviors are easy enough to detect and challenge if you feel inclined to do so. Here, the skill to be learned isn’t how to detect, but how to challenge such behaviors without provoking the person to anger. We’ll deal with that another day.

The point is, the everyday social world is not a harsh and dangerous one built on widespread deceit. It is mostly a slightly timid, risk-averse and benign world, full of people who are uncomfortable lying about anything serious. The lying happens at the extremes: lots of little white lies on one end, that don’t matter and don’t snowball, and a smaller world of professional, risk-managed, money-making lying on the other end, that includes marketers, cops, con-men and spies. And of course, there is a handful of big institutional lies that are in a class by themselves.

For everyday use, being able to tell apart people who are telling the truth from people who *think* they are telling the truth, is a far more important skill than lie detection. There are two important pseudo-truth-telling behaviors.

The first behavior is *candor*. When somebody leans back, opens with something like “let me be completely honest here,” and says things in a very sincere, disarming and open way, chances are *they believe what they are saying*. People who routinely start conversations this way can’t even handle the pressures of evasion, deflection or equivocation. For them, candor is a way to relieve the stress of keeping emotionally loaded ideas bottled-up inside. They are being candid not because the situation demands it, but because they can’t bear the stress of not being candid. Truth-telling requires you to first calmly separate your feelings from the facts and tell *yourself* the truth before you tell others. Candid people often fail to separate things this way and blurt out unprocessed thoughts. If there is truth in what they say, you’ll have to figure it out by guessing their feelings and correcting appropriately. You have to listen like a therapist.

The second behavior is *cursing*. When somebody gets mad and offers an opinion interspersed with curses. (“Look, let’s just admit the fucking truth here okay? That asshole was out to screw us all along! We got played.”) Again there is a failure to separate facts from the emotions associated with the facts, and an easy slide into aggressive posturing, under threat. The narrative that is offered is designed to bolster sagging self-confidence, seek validation and unconsciously simplify unpleasant realities in self-serving ways (being “blunt” blunts the truth). Opinions offered with a seasoning of curses will usually lack all sorts of key details.

Both pseudo-truth-telling behaviors arise from internal narratives that are grounded in unprocessed denial, rationalization and the like. You are being invited to participate in a fiction they’ve unconsciously constructed to protect themselves. It is very easy to be tempted because all the signs of truth-telling are present.

So what does genuine truth-telling feel like? It feels like clarity. When someone has processed their thoughts, separated fact from feeling, separated what is already known from what is new or as yet unknown, and

is offering up something they've deduced as being both true and unknown to you (and hence worth sharing), you'll experience at least a momentary sense of expanded clarity. Candor and cursing on the other hand, will provoke emotional responses from you, rather than moments of mental clarity.

Or if you enjoy using old-school rhetoric as a lens for such stuff, simply separate the *logos* from the (unconscious) *ethos* and *pathos*.

On Cold-Blooded Listening

Glengarry Glen Ross is one of my favorite movies of all time (even though I only watched it this year, after having had it on my to-watch list for years). The story (spoiler alert!) revolves around a group of real-estate salesmen, some promising new sales leads, and a plot by a couple of the salesmen to steal the leads locked in the manager's office, make it look like a burglary, and defect to a competing firm, where they expect to get a good price for the leads.

My favorite scene in the movie involves the tired, aging, former star salesman Levene (Jack Lemmon) and Williamson, the sociopath manager (Kevin Spacey). The scene illustrates a fantastic “slightly evil” listening strategy I call “cold-blooded listening.” Cold-blooded listening is, for slightly evil sociopaths, what nice, good-natured “active listening” is for losers.

This scene occurs the morning after the robbery when Williamson is busy helping the police. Roma (Al Pacino), the most successful salesman, who knows nothing about the plot, has just yelled at Williamson, because the burglary has caused him to lose a certain sale, and stormed out. Levene (who is part of the plot), currently the least successful salesman, who has just managed to close a sale the previous night, after a long time, decides to join in the fun and yell at Williamson too. All the pent-up anger and resentment comes pouring out, as Levene uses his rare opportunity to tell Williamson exactly what he thinks of him. Here's what happens:

- LEVENE: ...excuse me, nothing, you be as cold as you want, but you just fucked a good man out of six thousand dollars and his goddamn bonus 'cause you didn't know the shot, if you can do that and you aren't man enough that it gets you, then I don't know what, if you can't take some thing from that... you're scum, you're fucking white-bread. You be as cold as you want. A child would

know it, he's right. You're going to make something up, be sure it will help or keep your mouth closed.

- WILLIAMSON: Mmm.
- LEVENE: Now I'm done with you.
- WILLIAMSON: How do you know I made it up?
- LEVENE: What?
- WILLIAMSON: How do you know I made it up?
- LEVENE: What are you talking about?
- WILLIAMSON: You said, "You don't make something up unless it's sure to help." How did you know that I made it up?
- LEVENE: What are you talking about?
- WILLIAMSON: I told the customer that his contracts had gone to the bank.
- LEVENE: Well, hadn't it?
- WILLIAMSON: No. It hadn't.
- LEVENE: Don't fuck with me, John, don't fuck with me...what are you saying?
- WILLIAMSON: Well, I'm saying this, Shel: usually I take the contracts to the bank. Last night I didn't. How did you know that?

One night in a year I left a contract on my desk. Nobody knew that but you. Now how did you know that? You want to talk to me, you want to talk to someone else...because this is my job. This is my job on the

line, and you are going to talk to me. Now how did you know that contract was on my desk?

- LEVENE: You're so full of shit.
- WILLIAMSON: You robbed the office.

See what happened here?

Williamson listened in a completely cold-blooded way to Levene's rant (Spacey of course, plays this brilliantly, in his usual low-reactor way). The insults and *ad hominem*s roll right off him. He is completely confident in his own assessment of himself, and feels no need to defend himself against Levene's rant, or even acknowledge it (he does the same thing in response to Roma's rant in the scene just preceding this one).

But he *does* listen. He picks up on the *one* piece of actual information accidentally let out by Levene that is useful to him, the one piece that reveals that Levene knows something about the burglary. And suddenly, the tables are turned. Levene, who is being unusually cocky based on a sale (a shaky one that Williamson knows won't stick, incidentally, since the prospects are known mind-changers) tried to do some high-status crowing instead of low-status whining and groveling for a change. But he is simply not as tough as Williamson, and the tables get turned.

This is a fantastically valuable skill to learn. And a very difficult one. It goes well beyond thick skin. It is hardened-cop-style "anything you say can and will be used against you" listening. To get there takes a very special kind of personal growth:

- Get beyond thick skin: the only way to get to total impassivity in the face of strident criticism and insults is practice. And I am afraid this means developing a certain capacity for contempt. Williamson is clearly contemptuous of Levene's opinion here.

- Beyond-thick-skinned, contemptuous listening means you don't take what is said about your personality as serious feedback worth responding to. But this does *not* mean you don't listen. You listen in a sort of objective, clinical way, like a researcher observing an angry animal in a cage. Your radar is primed for information that is useful to you, not information that the other party *thinks* you ought to know (and is maliciously delighted to be able to give you).
- And remember, listening does not mean agreeing or debating. You can choose to listen, draw your own conclusions, and walk away, or steer the conversation so it proceeds on terms that are useful to you (as Spacey did). You don't have to convince the other person of *your* conclusions. Or even share them. Notice how Williamson doesn't reveal his "you robbed the office" conclusion until *after* he's done testing it as a hypothesis by following the clue and watching Levene fumble. Levene has no clue why Williamson is asking about the "made up" line, and Williamson doesn't bother to explain. He just assumes, like any good alpha, that he doesn't have to explain himself to Levene, and that he'll get a revealing response without having to explain the question.

I have to admit, I am not at the Spacey-Williamson level yet, but I have no problems admitting that I *do* aspire to it. I believe in responsiveness, empathy and listening. I also believe the world is phenomenally full of morons who are too full of themselves, whose opinions on most subjects can be ignored. Especially their opinions on *your* personality (heck, you are shooting for "slightly evil" anyway, which means you are shooting for effectiveness. Do you *really* expect to be liked as well?).

This is *not* a defense mechanism we are talking about here. When criticized, too many people fall into one of two basic errors. The first is to take the criticism as true on the face of it, without analysis, and earnestly attempt to change. That's just dumb. The second is to assume the criticism says more about the criticizer's personality than about yours. This is the "explain it away" defense mechanism. No, we aren't talking about either of those reactions here. The first is born of low self-esteem; the second is born out of a denial. What we are talking about here can only be practiced by

people with a high degree of self-awareness and self-acceptance. This means

most conversations can be processed in transactional terms (looking for information of value in the immediate situation, the robbery being navigated in this case) rather than getting sidetracked protecting your fragile ego from poisoned barbs being shot at you by inconsequential people.

Had Williamson been in *that* mode, he might have missed the clue to the burglary while his mind was furiously occupied defending a self-image.

Watch *Glengarry Glen Ross*. You won't regret it, I promise.

Orientation

Organizing the World's Delusions

Since the core value of Ribbonfarm Inc., Be Slightly Evil, is transparently based on mangling Google's goody-two-shoes core value, I figured I'd go ahead and mangle their mission statement as well to create one for my own. You can copy it if you like: *To Organize the World's Delusions*.

To understand what it means to organize delusions, recall this classic bit from *Catch-22*:

“I really can’t believe it,” Clevinger exclaimed to Yossarian in a voice rising and falling in protest and wonder. “It’s a complete reversion to primitive superstition. They’re confusing cause and effect. It makes as much sense as knocking on wood or crossing your fingers. They really believe we wouldn’t have to fly that mission tomorrow if someone would only tiptoe up to the map in the middle of night and move the bomb line over Bologna. Can you imagine? You and I must be the only rational ones left.”

In the middle of the night Yossarian knocked on wood, crossed his fingers, and tiptoed out of his tent to move the bomb line up over Bologna.

In *Catch-22*, Yossarian operates at the highest level of artistry in organizing delusions. It is a kind of extreme method acting; call it ironically absurd behavior. Yossarian manages to maintain a happily schizophrenic state of mind where he is simultaneously messing with the system, and participating in the delusions himself. Sometimes he messes with things consciously, for the hell of it. But at other times, as in the case of moving the bomb line, he manages to be ironically absurd without being random, organizing and benefiting from delusions, and actually believing in them, by playing metaphysical confidence tricks on himself that would have made Kierkegaard proud.

Organizing delusions is at the heart of all manipulation, but you have to start at much simpler levels, and work your way up to your Yossarian belt.

The Hierarchy of Delusion Organization

- *Getting out of the way:* The most basic level is based on avoiding challenging others' delusions, and factoring them into your own thinking. The "organizing" merely involves arranging matters so things and people you care about are moved out of the way of an impending train wreck.
- *Creating a sandbox:* At a more advanced level of practice, you catalyze, encourage and sustain delusions that benefit you. Organization gets a little harder: you have to create a safe sandbox so the delusion can survive a little longer than it would if reality were allowed to hit it too early. The benign example is of course, parenting. Geeks often call this a "reality distortion field." Assuming that pseudo-technical labeling equals inoculation is a delusion pattern peculiar to geekdom.
- *Pouring fuel on the spark:* At the next level – it's called PR – you fuel and amplify stabilized delusions on a more massive scale. All large organizations practice this. Both mass media and 1:1 word-of-mouth social media are your friends here. The polite term is "managing perceptions." The less polite term is "managing the optics" of a situation, a phrase that more clearly links to smoke-and-mirrors metaphors.
- *Manufacturing Delusions:* At the most complicated level, you manufacture delusions. This is a last-resort approach, and requires far too much creativity to be worth it unless the returns are really high. It is usually far better to amplify and domesticate delusions that you find in the wild.

Simplicity and Scale

When it comes to straightforward falsifiable delusions, the more widespread it is, the quicker it will die. To counteract this, you have to simplify delusions as you scale.

You can sustain elaborate fantasies for a single person. For a large group, you can usually only sustain a few key beliefs. At the level of human civilization, you can only sustain extremely simple, but very fertile fill-in-the-blanks delusions, such as “the Universe is here to do your bidding” (it’s called *The Secret*, and the one thing the authors of that movement get right is that it is an age-old and very widespread delusion).

Believing Your Own Delusions

So far, we’ve implicitly assumed we’re talking about brittle, falsifiable delusions. Dabbling in such delusions is dangerous precisely because when they collapse, the orchestrators are unmasked as deliberate manipulators. You are at risk of being accused of crimes ranging from simple manipulation through silence, through comparisons with Michael Moore or Karl Rove, all the way to being a Goebbels or Stalin. A good defense against the latter, by the way, is to simply cite Godwin’s Law^{*}. John Stewart and Stephen Colbert, for example, are masters at making fun of Fox News, using Godwin’s Law type criticisms. They do it so well, we often forget that they orchestrate their own delusion complexes, built out of a much more dangerous raw material: humor.

But opening yourself up to such accusations at all is the amateur way to play it. The way to *really* protect yourself is to adopt George Costanza’s law: *it’s not a lie if you believe in it.*

This is obviously hard to do with hard facts and falsifiable statements. Method acting only goes so far. The smart way to do this is to rely on unfalsifiability.

To be a professional organizer of delusions, you need to focus on delusions that it would actually benefit you to believe, at least temporarily, and then figure out how to adopt them for just as long as they can serve you.

Your overall goal is to create plausible deniability, even within your own mind, to defend against the accusation that you don't believe something that you are pitching to others. Your lifeline back to reality is your capacity for doubt, which prevents plausible deniability from turning into a pattern of denial that persists long after the expiry date on the delusion.

It is *much* easier to do this if you discipline yourself to *only* work with delusions that are a sufficiently complex mix of metaphysics, morality arguments, metaphor, narrative and facts.

This is why you get the most fundamental axiom in delusion organization theory: the bigger the lie, the easier it is to sell, and the biggest ones, bigger than even the civilization-scale ones, are the ones you deliberately sell to yourself.

Big lies are necessarily complicated constructs made up of the elements I mentioned: metaphysics, morality, metaphor, narrative and facts. If, for your own reasons, you deliberately funded an idiotic venture where all the numbers indicated that the market wasn't there, nobody can fault you later if you hide behind the assertion: "I invest in people, not ideas, and this guy really had passion, so I trusted him to figure it all out. Looks like I was wrong. Well, it's a numbers game.

But ultimately, even plausible deniability, based on hiding inside a jungle of unfalsifiable metaphysics, is not enough.

To win the Yossarian belt, you have to genuinely graduate to ironic absurdity, and traffic in delusions without getting attached to them. Without a sense of absurdity, you'll just fall off the slightly evil path and turn into yet another greedy hack, peddling subprime mortgages.

Status, Harmony and Conflict

An interpersonal interaction is *open* if both parties are seeking to trade or discover information. It is *closed* if even one party is seeking status validation, conflict or harmony instead. This means, unfortunately, that most interpersonal interactions end up being about such social intentions, since either party can unilaterally close an open interaction.

We generally understand conflict in for-and-against terms. *You are either with me or against me* is a raw conflict framing of an interaction. We generally understand status in pure above-me-below-me terms. *You are either better than me or worse than me* is a raw status-framing of an interaction. These pure situations, however, are fairly rare in adult life. Usually, only children play pure conflict or status games.

Adults are more likely to mix a conflict/harmony intention with a status intention. So you get the following four basic types of attitude informing an interaction:

- *Condescension*: I am better than you and for you
- *Contempt*: I am better than you and against you
- *Supplication*: I am worse than you and for you
- *Insolence*: I am worse than you and against you

It is very useful to learn to recognize these four attitudes. It makes you twice as effective as most people, who are usually only conscious of one or the other dimension (status or conflict/harmony). The four basic

attitudes create six basic types of interaction. I'll let you work out the combinatorics, but here is an example of condescension butting up against contempt:

- A: So what's going on with the project? (neutral)
- B: We're mostly busy dealing with that situation with the new client that the VP mentioned. (neutral)

- A: Well, I really don't have time for this, but I guess I could help you out. (condescension)
- B: Oh I wasn't asking. We deal with this at the program level. You'll hear about what we decide at the next meeting. (contempt)

The interactions between the characters of Al Swearengen and George Hearst on the show *Deadwood* contain many examples of another common pattern: condescension versus insolence. Many “Odd Couple” television shows are based on a stable pattern (usually condescension meeting supplication), but wander for variety into one of the other five patterns. At the other extreme, mutual contempt is usually a recipe for immediate breakdown and

disengagement, so drama can be created when people who hold each other in contempt are forced by circumstances to work together. Many buddy movies start with this premise, and end with mutual contempt transforming into mutual supplication.

The fun really starts when the overt attitudes dictated by the situation do not match the actual attitudes. Imagine a nominally harmonious patronizing/supplementary interaction like an entrepreneur pitching to a VC where the VC is actually in supplementary mode, fishing for approval, because the entrepreneur happens to be the new “It” guy/girl.

Or a young, poor and ugly male teacher feeling threatened by the wealth and looks of a male high school student, and being insolent while the student is being supplementary (asking for a higher grade for example).

Mixing and matching status movements with conflict/harmony elements is one of the most fun ways to both read and imagine little conversation scripts. For the student of Slightly Evil philosophy though, such status-and-conflict games are generally time-wasters (though you should learn to play them because you can be forced into them by external factors).

Wherever possible, you should attempt to move the conversation to an open one that is about generating or exchanging information, or disengage if that

turns out to be impossible.

Conflict Without Ego

Consider a conversation that proceeds along these lines:

- A: We really need to prioritize the new version of our successful Widget and consolidate our marketshare lead.
- B: I think we really need to consider a new Super Widget. There are some trends that marketing identified in the last review. We need to respond to them.

At this point, A and B are headed for conflict and both have become aware of it. It is A's move and what he/she says will strongly influence what happens next. Here are some options:

- I disagree, the stuff they called out in the review was bullshit.
- Well, what's the cashflow picture for the next few quarters? That's going to ultimately determine how much spare cash we can throw off for a new product initiative.
- Well, so long as our revenue from Widget doesn't decline until at least 2015, I am open to anything.
- Which specific trends did you think needed a response?

These responses represent firing a warning shot across B's bows (1), framing a zero-sum discussion (2), cautiously opening negotiations with some pre-conditions (3), a no-strings-attached invitation to debate (4) (note that 4 can also be a feint, to draw out intelligence to inform a more precise attack than 1, but this post isn't about maneuvering tactics, so let's ignore that subtlety).

Which of these responses do you think is the smartest one?

The Importance of Context in Conflict

The correct answer is *insufficient information*. We are missing data about context. If A is the product manager of the Widget product and B is the

manager of the R&D laboratory, you should immediately suspect that this conversation is about protecting budgets by any means necessary. If A is the CFO and B is the CEO, the conversation means something else entirely (and the extent to which their respective salaries are related to the stock price adds another layer of complexity). If both are in sales, but A enjoys babysitting old customers while B enjoys the challenge of pitching a new product to new customers, you've got another interpretation. If the sales role involves a commission structure, that changes things as well.

What is common across all these contextual issues is that almost all of them are about individual motivations of A and B. Missing material facts that have no *a priori* coupling to individual motivations represent basic ignorance. Unless A and B are idiots, if that is an issue, they will very quickly agree to reconvene after they have the missing material facts.

Why Motivations Get Buried in Context

So as a first approximation, it is safe to say that what is buried in context is individual motivations; specifically the relationships between your motivations and those of others you are in conflict with. Which is surprising because everybody understands that conflicts arise from competing motivations. You'd think they'd be more visible, given their obvious importance.

Buried motivations can be further broken down into *extrinsic* (motivations that are a function of the environment, such as role and incentives) and *intrinsic* (those that arise from ego issues, defense mechanisms, status dynamics and so forth).

Things break down this way because in modern culture we expect conversations to be based on facts and a posture of objective analysis. Nobody is supposed to want anything other than the “truth” in some procedural sense of the word. This is true even in close personal relationships.

The result is that in most conversations end up being a theater of superficial objectivity sitting atop a mountain of consequential context. You can imagine a sort of 3-layer model. The top layer is the overtly acknowledged objective stuff.

One level down you have extrinsic social motivations. Sophisticated conversationalists are usually able to gracefully foreground and acknowledge these as being either relevant or not, so that the overt discussion becomes more substantial. For example, in the A-as-CFO case, A might preface each of the possible responses with “I am not just saying this because I am coming at it from the CFO perspective,” a discounting move that may or may not work completely, but will definitely deepen the conversation.

But the hardest piece of the puzzle to take into account is buried in the third layer: intrinsic individual motivations. These might be so deeply buried through denial and repression patterns that they might not even be consciously accessible.

For example, assume that we’re talking about the product manager/R&D manager extrinsic context. What are the sorts of intrinsic motivations that might lead to response 1?

1. A might have been snubbed at the last party by the chief marketing officer and is subconsciously grabbing an opportunity to discredit marketing.
2. A might have deep insecurities around being considered “boring” compared to the people in R&D who are perceived as “exciting and interesting.”
3. A might have a chip on his shoulder about undue importance given to childish silliness going on in R&D while his group does the real work of bringing in the money.
4. A might have deeply repressed associations of anxiety relating to the kind of plaid jacket that B happens to be wearing, because a sadistic teacher in primary school used to wear such jackets.

5. A might be female. It might all be unacknowledged gender dynamics and the idea that she needs to be assertive so she's not taken for granted as a woman.
6. The whole thing might have an undercurrent of sexual tension.
7. The whole thing might have to do with a sense of violence in the air (perhaps A is a powerfully built athlete while B is a scrawny weakling, and bullying instincts are kicking in).

How can you possibly navigate all this potential complexity? It might seem like I've defined an impossible problem.

Emotions About Facts, Facts About Emotions

It turns out though, that the key to cutting through this complexity isn't this sort of detailed dissection and analysis (though that is useful too, on occasion, if done offline and explicitly for the purpose of learning). The key is to work towards what martial artists like to characterize as "conflict without ego." Here, "ego" is shorthand for all intrinsic individual motivations, known and unknown.

The key to conflict without ego is the observation that you cannot get mad at facts. The sun rises everyday. Things fall to the ground. You need to pay employees.

If there are emotions in play, they necessarily relate to individual motivations. Even when the facts are about people. You cannot get mad at the fact that some people are more attractive than you. You can only get mad over desires relating to things that being attractive gets you.

Extrinsic motivations can and should be foregrounded because they play a role in objective analysis. In this process of foregrounding, you can also drain these extrinsic motivations of unhelpful emotions, because fundamentally they are outside you. This requires increasing skill and sophistication in conversation. Response 2 from A is actually an example of this. It is a move that brings an unacknowledged extrinsic motivation

(“don’t touch my cash flow!”) to the discussion table, and quantifies the role it plays in a way that assuages nameless anxieties (the new Super Widget product is no longer a horrifying existential threat to A’s cash flows, but a quantifiable one amenable to trade-off computations). This takes both a certain level of domain-specific experience, as well as conversational skill.

But you cannot do this to intrinsic motivations. Even when you are aware of them, it may not be socially possible to talk about them. In the case of 7, what is A going to say? “I want to whip your scrawny ass, but since we’re adults, I cannot do that, but I am going to yell at you to intimidate you”? And in the case of things like 4 (the plaid jacket), you might not be able to dig out such factors even with years of expensive psychoanalysis. And there are thousands of such little tics buried deep in your psyche. You cannot possibly surface and compute with all of them consciously. More to the point, most of them are almost certainly irrelevant to the point under contention anyway (smart people will usually recognize truly logical connections quickly).

For these, the key is to acknowledge and bracket emotions and consciously let them go. Some emotions are easier to handle this way than others, such as anger and pride. Others are harder: an emotion might have no name, and manifest very weakly as a slight tension in your lower back. The only way you can process is to become aware of it and let it go, even if you don’t understand where it came from or what it represents (plaid jackets perhaps; but you don’t need to care about root causes, only manifestations that you become aware of). And because they are likely irrelevant anyway, it is safe to let them go for the purposes of the conversation. You can always have a different conversation of course, but so long as the nominal and overt topic of conversation is a genuine one, you can let irrelevant things go.

All this should be of no surprise to those of you who have tried mindfulness meditation or related disciplined practices. But even without disciplined practice, just being aware of the way these things work is half the battle. In an undisciplined, *ad hoc* way, you will slowly become better at

grappling with the hidden realities of your psyche. That path is the path to conflict without ego.

Ideas and The Nature of Violence

But why conflict at all? If you can truly approach interpersonal interactions in this ego-less way, with intrinsic motivations handled, and all objective facts and extrinsic motivations on the discussion table, shouldn't you be able to avoid conflict altogether?

I came up with this formulation: Violence is a *necessary* consequence of *unavoidable* ignorance on the part of systems that lack infinite wisdom. You cannot avoid it, or enlighten yourself out of it.

But for a long time I wasn't able to translate this into a form more usable in everyday interactions. Only recently did I come up with an articulation that I sort of liked: *The ideas of your friends are not always the friends of your ideas.*

What does this mean? It means that even when two mindful and egoless individuals have adequately let go of emotions relating to buried, irrelevant, intrinsic motivations, and are dealing with the relevant facts and extrinsic motivations in sophisticated ways, and properly identifying and reacting appropriately to areas of ignorance, you will *still* have conflict.

You cannot force complex intelligence to emerge on your schedule. We try to create complex intelligence by pursuing things called "ideas" that seem right to us, rather than mechanically working out inferences from facts.

And our idea-pursuit instincts may not lead us along the same paths as those of others. Because every person spots and pursues ideas in complex situations differently, based on past experiences, learned pattern recognition skills and vast amounts of prior knowledge. You can only dimly understand what idea or pattern another person is pursuing through what they say.

And when these paths of idea pursuit diverge, you must either capitulate and follow, or fight. If you like to wax spiritual about such stuff, you can tell yourself that you are just one tiny bundle of atoms that is part of a universe that is slowly figuring itself out and getting enlightened. You might have to fight today so that the whole world is slightly more enlightened tomorrow.

This understanding of violence and conflict also reveals something about friendship, and an Eleanor Roosevelt quote captures it beautifully: “Great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, small minds discuss people.”

But jumping straight to discussing ideas does not make yours a great mind. Discussing ideas is only a sign of great minds if events and people – both matters of context and motivation – have been adequately dealt with.

When a friendship can stand the test of sometimes-diverging, sometimes-converging pursuit of individual ideas, it acquires great depth. Relationships based on false harmony and denial of ideas, or worse, one party cravenly abandoning their own ideas in the interests of preserving the relationship, are fundamentally weak, and not worth very much.

The Basics of Negotiation

I learned the basics of routine, everyday negotiation by noticing something very puzzling. The people who seemed to negotiate most successfully looked and acted nothing like the tough, ice-cold types you see in Hollywood movies. One guy couldn't hold eye contact, stuttered, and smiled too much. He aggressively played lowball and won every time. Another time, I observed a thoroughly scatterbrained and frivolous-seeming woman (it was *not* an act), who chattered and whined incessantly, trying to work a deal. She won big. On the flip side, I've met people who look and act like Kevin Spacey in *The Negotiator*, but end up blowing sure-fire great deals (while retaining their pointless icy calm of course).

When you negotiate based on how you think you should look and act, based on Hollywood stereotypes, you end up like George Costanza on *Seinfeld*. He attempts to put on a professional swagger and play hard-ball negotiator to close a deal with NBC. His swagger ends up trapping him into accepting a deal with *less* money than was originally being offered.

People make this mistake for a simple reason: in routine negotiations, almost *all* the work is done away from the actual negotiating table, and before the critical face-to-face encounters. In many cases, the pre-work is so effective that the negotiation doesn't happen at all, or if it happens, is a matter of ritual. The kind of tense, openly-adversarial zero-sum negotiation with a ticking clock that we see in movies is a very exceptional kind of negotiation. The kind of dull pre-work that is possible in routine negotiations is not possible, and there are artificially hard near-term deadlines. This puts a lot of tension and pressure into the live situation. The most common negotiations on the other hand, are the ones that don't happen at all because a skilled person prevented things from getting to the table at all. Dull pre-work is substituted for live negotiation work, and instead of a fixed deadline, you get a smart person cherry-picking an *ideal* time to start the negotiations.

Dealing with extreme negotiation situations is a very specialized skill that is very expensive and time-consuming to acquire, and completely worthless for everyday situations. When it comes to negotiation, bringing a gun to a knife fight is as pointless as bringing a knife to a gunfight. And bringing *any* sort of weapon to a negotiation that could be just a handshake is beyond stupid. Those professional level skills *don't* apply to everyday situations, for exactly the same reasons that a surgeon can cut open your head and perform miracles, but can do nothing to get you to eat healthy and exercise. The surgeon's solution – stomach stapling – is an extreme, exceptional intervention for those who fail to solve the problem of preventive health maintenance at an everyday level. And just as you wouldn't attempt surgery on yourself when necessary, but hire a real surgeon, when you are actually faced with a "gunfight" negotiation, you should probably consider hiring a gunfighter rather than trying to become one through a weekend seminar.

So how *should* you negotiate? There are only four basic elements you need to understand: information, creativity, trust and BATNA ("Best Alternative To a Negotiated Agreement," the only technical term you really need to know). Here's how they work together:

Information is simple. The more there is that can be mutually agreed upon, the less there is to negotiate. This is the main reason unlikely people walk away winners. Good pre-work trumps good table-work every time. When you move one bit of information over from the "to be debated" column to the "common ground" column, you make the table-thumper one bit less effective. Part of the reason hostage negotiations are hard is because there is so little information, and so little time to discover it. The best way to avoid negotiation altogether is to do so much pre-work that you understand the other parties' options, costs and benefits better than they do, and can actually work out the "best for everybody" solution before you even get to the table.

What does the information pre-work actually consist of? Definitions and technical analysis. You define all options, and use all the data to model the risks and rewards properly. Decision theory, game theory, statistics and Excel skills are all tools here. It is basically tedious gruntwork. Apparent

“human” factors can be turned into data this way. One example is using discounting-based analysis of future payoffs to replace loosey-goosey talk of “win-win” outcomes with hard numbers.

Creativity is harder. Given a pile of relevant information, and as much dull technical analysis as you can manage in the time available, you may still be left with far too much uncertainty about the different options and their relative desirability, leaving too much room for “he said she said” types of conflict and debate. Being creative means coming up with *new* options that make better use of the information available by lowering uncertainties all around. A classic example is to turn a conversation about a big 10-million-dollar deal into one about a short-term \$100,000 deal by proposing a “pilot engagement.” Dating before marriage is another example. Again, if you do your creative thinking ahead of time, you’ll come up with solid and believable new options. Otherwise you will end up involved in the sort of annoying game of real-time creative storytelling that I described in my post “Bargaining with Your Right Brain.”

Trust is harder still. Wherever possible, the smartest way to negotiate is to do a whole bunch of “discovery” pre-work conversations that serve two purposes. First, they help tease out what people know, and haven’t yet shared, all around. Second, you get a read on basic mutual trust levels among all parties. The key here is to not even *attempt* the negotiation until you’ve raised trust levels all around to a sufficiently high level. In your trust pre-work, you need to figure out several things. Who is negotiating in good faith, and who is negotiating in bad faith? Who is being free with information and who is being secretive? Who are your allies, who is hopelessly intransigent and needs to be neutralized, and who needs gentle persuasion over multiple interactions to come around? How much of all this trust information is common knowledge? You may need months of meetings (1:1, small groups, full groups) ostensibly dedicated to discovery and information sharing, before trust is sufficiently high that you can start “negotiations.” These can range from informal lunches, to parties to seminars aimed at “knowledge sharing.” Finally, you need to figure out one *crucial* thing: which parties are going to be dealing with each other extensively for an indeterminate amount of time in the future, and who is going to exit the picture? About the *only* firm truth in negotiation is that

people who are going to terminate all relationships and walk away very soon behave very differently from people who aren't sure how much they'll be dealing with each other in the future. Some part of this assertion can be codified, quantified and proved through game theory (it's the basic insight behind the famous "iterated prisoner's dilemma" theory of cooperation). But the phenomenon is much richer than the game theory models, and it is generally more useful to think of a situation in terms of the pasts and futures of all the interpersonal stories involved.

The information, creativity and trust pre-work take time, and costs money. If the deal isn't worth the pre-work, that's one reason to walk away on Day 1. The fourth element, BATNA, doesn't take much pre-work time (often only a few minutes if it isn't blindingly obvious), but is the hardest element to master, because it is generally about walking away *after* putting in lots of expensive pre-work.

Defining your *BATNAs* is therefore the hardest kind of pre-work, since they represent a potential cost that is more than the other three elements put together. As Kipling said in his classic poem *If*:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings

And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,

And lose, and start again at your beginnings

...

you'll be a Man my son!

When you bargain for a cheap watch at a street market, you know that Being Willing To Walk Away (BWTWA) is your single most powerful weapon. BWTWA is the simplest example of a BATNA. More complex negotiations have other BATNAs, but all are forms of "walking away." In the best case this simply means a lost opportunity (for a mutually-beneficial trade agreement for instance). In the worst case, it can mean armed conflict and real, as opposed to psychological losses. You can't walk away from a mugger. Your BATNA for the "wallet for your life" deal offered by the

mugger is to either run (and hope to get away) or fight (and hope to win). For a salary negotiation, your BATNA is to quit (possibly with the added cost of lost recommendations). For an entrepreneur who doesn't like the terms offered by a VC, the BATNA may be to just shut down the company. BATNA is very hard for most people because the BATNA is *always* about a willingness to lose something, sometimes your life.

There are BATNAs for every situation, but there are also life BATNAs: your baseline commitments to yourself that allow you to cheerfully walk away from anything. Here it pays to keep in mind that your ultimate BATNA to the whole "deal of life" is actually fixed and unchangeable: you are going to die (because your negotiating opponent, nature, is infinitely more powerful than you). If you are going to die anyway, it makes it much easier to accept "death" as a BATNA for specific situations. And since nearly all other BATNAs are preferable to death, that attitude makes you a very strong negotiator.

The one BATNA that is worse than death is of course, torture, as illustrated by the booga-booga joke. Two men are shipwrecked on an island. The sadistic native chief offers each a deal: "Booga booga or death?" The first guy picks booga-booga, and is immediately subjected to hideous tortures, and finally let go, nearly dead. The second man decides he prefers death. "Fine," says the chief. "Booga-booga him to death!" (A nice use of sadistic OR-XOR bluffing by the chief here!)

Without a defined BATNA, negotiations are toothless. BATNAs are what make all negotiating at least "slightly evil." You can add deceit, bad faith and bluffing to make the game as evil as you like, but even the baseline best-faith type of informed negotiation is "slightly evil" because your BATNA is a *unilateral* option that has consequences for others that *they* will be forced to live with. Anybody can accept consequences for themselves. It takes a slightly evil attitude to be willing to force potentially unpleasant consequences on others, regardless of what they want.

Information, creativity, trust and BATNAs. That's all there is to the basics.

Decision

Indifference to Sunk Costs

Slightly evil people often appear to be extreme risk takers to others. This is actually far from the truth. They are often *more* conservative. One of the big factors that creates the illusion of the slightly evil being daring gamblers is indifference to sunk costs.

Here's an example. Suppose you've put in eleven months of work into building a piece of software. You have one month left to finish when you suddenly discover a fantastic open-source equivalent that you can work on tweaking for two weeks, and produce a better outcome than if you persevered and finished your own design. At this point, the fact of you having put in eleven months worth of hard work is basically irrelevant. You'll deliver a better outcome faster if you were to just throw away your own work and use the open-source equivalent. And that's the path the slightly evil decision-maker will invariably take.

At least that's the *rational* story. Or what appears to be a rational story. Actually, despite what the behavioral economists say, there is no absolute here. Nobody can tell you what subjective value to place on an outcome (women know this better than men; this is the generalization of "don't tell me how to feel"). If the primary value you get out of your software projects is the ability to tell stories of how you delivered things under time pressure, having one more war story to tell is more valuable than delivering earlier, better and cheaper. If this is hard for you to understand, consider a different example. You are climbing up a mountain with no road to the top. Halfway up, you discover that there *is* in fact a road, and a passing driver offers you a lift. Do you accept or do you continue on your climbing path? There are many roads to the top of the mountain, and the view is *not* the same.

Where it gets irrational is if you tell yourself one story to make the decision, but another to live out the consequences. If you make the "rational" decision but suffer the regret for the rest of your life of not achieving closure, completion and the addition of another software war story to tell your grandchildren, you are being irrational. And vice versa.

This sort of irrationality is what motivates the process of “rationalization” at the individual level. At the collective level, rationalization is triggered by conflict between the stories told by *different* people.

Let's call consistency between the decision-making story (expected value of a decision) and the experienced ever-after story (realized value of the consequences) *relative rationality*, to distinguish it from the absolute one-size-fits all kind that behavioral economists like.

When your personal relative rationality is a strong function of your subjective experiences, the decisions of those whose relative rationality is heavily weighted towards external realities will seem unduly risky to you. That's because they're callously throwing away things that seem valuable to you.

In the sunk costs case, you will end up asking the slightly evil decision maker, “how could you throw it all away?” or “didn't you feel like finishing just for the sake of closure?”

The answer is that sunk costs only have a seductive appeal to those who are attached to their subjective past. They do not like the thought that the person they were, two days ago, was possibly engaged in futile activity. They want to behave in ways that redeem their past days.

Slightly-evil people, either by nature or through cultivation, are simply incapable of thinking this way. They place the most value on external, tangible outcomes.

Where this creates issues is in collaborative work. Slightly-evil people, through their sunk-costs indifference, can appear insensitive and callous to others with more subjective relative rationalities. Newbie slightly evil types often make the absolute-rationality mistake and attempt hopelessly to lecture their colleagues on why sunk costs don't matter.

The more sophisticated ones carry their analysis one step further: if your team-member's subjective relative rationality causes him/her to react to decisions in ways that create *real* outcome issues for you, it will now cost you as well.

In the software example, let's say two people were involved, you and a friend. If you are slightly evil, while your partner is heavily attached to closure and "finishing," he may try very hard to make up rationalizations between your objective-weighted story and his subjective-weighted one ("we can't use that open source thing; we haven't tested it enough..."). If you make the sunk-costs-indifferent decision anyway, he may resent you and cause problems down the road.

To the slightly evil, the answer is simple. Do the future real costs of the resentment for you outweigh the benefit of making the sunk-costs-indifferent decision? If so, it is worth humoring your colleague. If not, make the sunk-costs indifferent decisions and deal with the fallout.

In this simple, made up example, most people would probably be capable of acting slightly evil. As things get more complex and subjective, objective and social consequences blend together into messy stories that are very hard to analyze. In such situations, sunk-cost indifference turns into that philosophical attitude we know as *realism*.

Vindictiveness and Revenge

Is it rational to practice revengeful behaviors? The very thought is anathema to positive-thinking win-win types, and at a very superficial level of analysis, revenge *is* an irrational thing. It seems worse than doing nothing in response to a provocation – you waste time and effort causing pain to others *and* pay the opportunity cost of not doing something more positive/win-win with that time/effort. So is there *ever* a good reason to do something so apparently stupid?

Revenge emerges when you add up two traits: an innate tendency towards vindictiveness and a capacity for long-range planning. Vindictiveness is simpler and much more fundamental. In tribal societies it leads to vendetta dynamics. In civilized societies, it leads to revenge dynamics.

And strange as it may seem, vindictiveness and vendettas are quite rational, but *revenge* is not.

So the slightly evil lesson is this: to the extent that the society you are in is tribal, being vindictive and indulging in vendettas is rational in objective terms. To the extent that the society around you is civilized, these behaviors will backfire. Revenge on the other hand is *never* objectively worthwhile, whether the society is tribal or civilized. This is rather ironic, since it is actually revenge that takes the most intelligence and rational planning.

Real-Time Vindictiveness

Vindictiveness is a natural tendency to immediately and instinctively push back when pushed, as hard or harder than you were pushed. If you cannot push back immediately, you remember the slight for as long as it takes, and push back at the first opportunity. Let's talk about the immediate case first, and the remembered case (vendetta) later.

Vindictiveness is a hard-wired operating assumption that if somebody is initiating a conflict with you, they are probably in the wrong. Road rage provides a good illustration. So when somebody honks loudly at you and gives you the finger as they pass, there are two possible reasons:

- They did something wrong, like trying to speed, that led to a dangerous situation, and are blaming you.
- You did something wrong, like making a dangerous lane change, and they are punishing you.

If you instinctively curse, honk back harder, and give them the finger (i.e. assume hypothesis 1) before you can figure out what the situation is, you have a strong vindictive streak. If you instinctively shrink back and get uncertain and start wondering “Oh, what did I do wrong?” you might be a bit of a wuss (unless there are good reasons to default to the assumption that you were wrong, like being a new driver).

If you suspend judgement and immediately start looking around to actually figure out what happened, you are assuming nothing. This is the apparently rational, data-driven way to proceed. In contexts where winning matters (honking matches on the road aren’t among them), it is also a way to lose.

The problem with the apparently rational response is that such situations are often fast-moving and ambiguous, and it is hard to tell who was in the wrong. Often there is shared blame as well as a role played by bad luck. If you don’t act immediately, your rational analysis will not matter. Inaction is loss.

So vindictiveness is a default tendency to blame others when you suffer a loss, and reacting by trying to get even. *Getting even* is the key phrase here. Vindictiveness is a status-leveling move. If somebody hurts you, it doesn’t matter what the reasons and backstory are. *If you don’t hurt them back, you’ve lost status points.*

So the intensity of an vindictive reaction is usually proportionate to the perceived *status* loss, not to the actual material loss in the situation. This is why for instance, even if they do the same damage, an open-handed slap

across the face, a back-handed slap and a punch are very different moves in terms of status signals. The first is an attempt to lower the other's status. The second is an attempt to assert your own. The third is a neutral move whose status significance depends on context.

Beyond proportionality, to the extent possible, the reaction should be of the *same kind*. An eye for an eye. We'll see the importance of this later.

This is a tough idea for win-win types to accept: *vindictive pushback is a very rational reaction*. Though the highways and large anonymous cities are mostly full of strangers, vindictiveness makes a lot of sense in the context of older, more tribal cultures where everybody knew everybody. So even if there are no witnesses to a honk-and-honk-back type skirmish, you will likely interact with that person again, and he/she will likely report his/her version of the events to the rest of the group. You will likely do the same on your end.

If you *don't* push back, your opponent has a story to tell where your inaction can be read as acceptance of guilt, "Yeah, I yelled at him, and he had nothing to say. The jerk knew he was in the wrong."

Pushing back vindictively in a skirmish is the real-time equivalent of pleading "not guilty" in a courtroom. You create a raw story that's harder for your opponent to spin in his favor. If you push back, the symmetry of the skirmish creates a record of facts that can be spun either way. If it comes to that, the he-said-she-said incident will be decided by a majority vote. Social proof of character and power, rather than material proof concerning the truth about the incident. This is where tribal dynamics around "honor" come from. This is why it is crucially important in tribal cultures to develop a reputation as someone who cannot be pushed around, someone not to be messed with.

This also explains why (again, in tribal societies) it is rational to push back *harder* than you were pushed. You prefer a decisive outcome to the shoving/pushing/shouting contest for three reasons, especially if there are witnesses. First, you should visibly exact a penalty for the opponent starting an unjustified conflict. Second, the opponent knows *personally* not to mess with you again, out of real fear of hurt. And third, if he *does* spread his own

version of the story, even if he convinces his friends that he was *morally* right, you actually get PR for your not-to-be-messed-with reputation, because you won the actual fight.

In fact, you could make a stronger statement, based on the analogy to the “not guilty” plea:

Even if you know you were wrong, if you ALSO know the other person cannot possibly know that, it pays to take offense and push back.

Why?

Because accepting blame without proof (i.e., needlessly admitting guilt) legitimizes the other person’s authority to act as judge, jury and executioner *without proof*. If the opponent were a noble and perfectly virtuous person, this wouldn’t be a bad thing. You could trust them to bear the honor with responsibility. But if the opponent is a flawed human with his/her own agenda, legitimizing their actions is the equivalent of creating a corrupt mini-court just to prosecute you. Everything you say can and will be used against you (and your entire clan), with extreme prejudice.

The tribal world is full of such ambiguous, adversarial skirmishes. Being very generous, always giving the other person the benefit of the doubt, handing over information advantages regarding the material truth of a matter without a fight, and turning the other cheek without regard to the character of the opponent – all these civilized responses are recipes for getting killed very quickly. There is a reason prison cultures have the rule that you should beat up somebody on your first day.

Social Memory and Vendettas

When you cannot immediately respond to an attack (perhaps it was indirect, like somebody spray-painting insults on your door, or beating up an ally who couldn’t fight back), you have delayed responses. In tribal societies, this leads to long-running vendettas for two reasons: first, the natural tendency to push-back harder even in the real-time case, and second,

another tendency that exaggerates it: a sort of social compound interest. The insult festers and grows in magnitude with every moment, and every telling of the story.

This isn't just a subjective sense of growing resentment. The status loss results in an ongoing series of real transactional losses until you correct it, since it will put you at a disadvantage in *other* transactions, with others who have heard the story.

A vendetta is not a revenge. There isn't a whole lot of deliberation, planning or subterfuge. In fact those tend to make for ineffective vendettas, because the point of every move and counter-move in a vendetta is to demonstrate *raw* power and making a "not guilty" case in the court of public opinion. The point is not to demonstrate intelligence. In fact, it pays to make your vendetta move as visibly close to the original as possible. If they killed one of your sons, you kill one (or *two*) of their sons. Complicating the story with clever moves makes it much harder to read socially, and third parties are left feeling uncertain about what is going on. You want it to be completely obvious that you were responsible for the counter-move, and what motivated it. The symmetry in the stories cancels out everything except the raw status accounting.

Vendettas though, are inherently unstable, because of the ambiguity of the compound interest process and the coarseness of real-world options. If they killed one of your sons, and you suffered the compounded effects of status loss for six months, you can only kill one of his sons or two of his sons. If the mysterious calculus of tribal justice leads to the *implicit* public consensus that you are owed 1.2 sons, there is no way to respond with a move that cancels out the original move. You either underreact or overreact. Worse, if the opponent does not *have* a son, and you do something like burning down his house or kidnapping a daughter, you've now created *more* ambiguity. The equation becomes *more* illegible over time, not less. The status market has inefficiencies.

Vendettas therefore, naturally escalate, because in the short-term, it makes more sense to overreact and let the other person deal with the market inefficiency, than to underreact. (Technical note for the game theorists here, which the rest of you can safely ignore. You may be familiar with the idea

in the Iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma that the “Tit for Tat” is an evolutionary equilibrium. It works because in a perfect information, zero-ambiguity setting, it is actually possible to react in exact proportion to your opponent’s move. The real world, sadly, is not so clean.)

There is only one way to resolve a vendetta, and that is to draw a dividing line and create a detente with occasional skirmishes to make sure everybody remembers the vendetta. Or one group moves away until old memories are forgotten.

That brings us to revenge.

Revenge

The modern world is an uneasy mix of tribal and non-tribal dynamics. We don’t live out our whole lives in small communities where everybody knows everybody else. Group memories are weaker. Tribes form and disband more easily. We have a lot of interactions with strangers. The idea of “honor” evolves from being a life-or-death intrinsic measure of reputation to something that lives in medals, degrees and expensive cars. There are also many trusted externalized institutions, and many more conflicts can be adjudicated by truly disinterested third parties who don’t belong to either of the warring tribes (which in modern settings is no more than the friends and immediate families of the litigants in a courtroom).

We call this evolved, non-tribal context “civilization.”

Vindictiveness though is not a carefully planned context-sensitive behavior. It arises out of instinctive status computations under the assumption of a tribal context. The push-back-when-pushed way of setting goals, and the compound-interest calibration of required magnitude continue to drive goal setting. If civilization gets in the way (your tribe dissolves around you, the other person moves to another city and starts a new life...), you bring all your rational powers to bear to *engineer* a payback opportunity.

The Count of Monte Cristo is of course, the best known of such revenge sagas. Edmond Dantes goes about systematically taking the lives of his opponents apart after he escapes from prison. Things have changed so much though that they don't even recognize him until he reveals himself.

This is of course, completely hollow, as Dantes himself realizes at the end. If there is no shared tribe around you, and no interested third parties comparing the two of you and making relative status calculations, the whole affair is mostly pointless. At best you'll balance out some irrational internal status equation that even your opponent cannot parse (there is a hilarious *reductio ad absurdum* of this kind of story in Douglas Adam's *Hitchhiker* series, where Arthur Dent unwittingly kills the same creature in multiple reincarnations).

The other thing that can happen to vindictive instincts unleashed in a non-tribal context is that you can develop a sense of injury and resentment against large and faceless *institutions* rather than individuals. If you were deeply screwed over by some bureaucratic process, but it is obvious even to you that the hapless clerk you dealt with is not culpable, you end up wanting to push back at the institution.

In the best case, this can lead to tough, assertive behavior when dealing with customer service centers over the phone.

In the worst case, it can turn you into the Unabomber.

Just how messed-up is revenge against institutions? About as messed up as revenge against wild animals. If your brother accidentally fall into the lion's cage at the zoo and it eats him, you wanting to kill the lion is just plain silly. It was not playing status games with your brother. It was looking for lunch. Revenge against institutions is often equally silly. When they hurt you, it usually isn't due to tribal status motives. Hence the wisdom in Hanlon's Razor: *never attribute to malice what can be adequately explained by stupidity*.

Of course, judges are real people too and the transition to institutionalized civilization can be tricky. There is a wonderful Hindi short story by Munshi Premchand, called *God Lives in the Panch*. The premise of

the story is that one of the two parties in a vendetta gets appointed to the Panch, which is the tribal council of elders, just as the other party is about to go on trial in an unrelated matter. He starts to fear that his enemy will abuse his position to hurt him. As it happens, the newly-appointed councillor feels a sense of respect for the *role* the moment come over him as he assumes office, discovers a higher nature within himself, and delivers a fair verdict.

So revenge is obviously a deeply messed-up expression of vindictiveness. It is hard to even call it “evil.” It is just plain insanity. A result of deeply messed-up thinking.

But you cannot make the leap from that obvious point to the conclusion that vindictiveness (or even vendetta-seeking) are irrational. Our world is *not* fully civilized. Everything does *not* get adjudicated in courts run by judges who behave respectfully towards their offices. To the extent that an extended conflict is playing out in the *same* tribal context (such as a corporate department), where reputations matter, and to the extent that individual players are legible (i.e. you are not railing against a system to which you are imputing tribal motives), calibrated vindictive behavior is valuable.

To put it in the context of the most familiar battleground for most of us, if you do not push back when pushed in the office, you will have people walking all over you. A nominal organizational peer attempting to assert authority over you by “delegating” work to you over email requires immediate pushback to establish the right status relationship. Possibly with a cc to the joint manager. And yes, this *does* create a problem for the manager to deal with. That’s his/her job: to civilize the essentially tribal interaction for the greater good.

And yes, sometimes marketing and sales need to engage in a period of vendetta so they can deal with each other with the right level of mutual respect, instead of one organization walking all over the other. And yes, this *does* create a problem. It is a tough kind of inter-tribal warfare problem, and the CEO has to tread delicately so that an attempt at “civilizing” the interactions does not end up killing the tribal passions that also get real

work done. It's the sort of problem CEOs are paid to solve. And they are certainly paid enough, so we need not feel sorry for them.

But to the extent that our world is *not* tribal, you *do* need a place to direct your vindictive instincts. There are only two real options: learn to forget, forgive and move on (probably to a different tribe), or go insane.

Action

On Petards

When I first started collecting notes on Slightly Evil tactics, I noticed that a lot of very effective people had a favorite one: hoisting others up by their own petards.

As I collected examples and pondered, I began to realize that this isn't just another Slightly Evil tactic. It is popular for a reason: it is the grand-daddy of them all. Many other tactics can be derived from it.

First things first. *Petard* is a French term for a small bomb used to blow up fortifications. Apparently, during medieval sieges, they were hoisted into strategic positions before being blown up, and the engineer lighting the fuse would sometimes get entangled in the ropes and get hoisted up along with the bomb, and blown up. Hence the phrase.

In modern usage, the phrase is used to describe the tactic of using somebody's own arguments against them. Like using somebody's own momentum against them in martial arts, this is a very basic principle. Here's a typical example you might encounter in the workplace.

- Alice: Let's finalize this right now in this small group, before the all-hands meeting.
- Bob: I thought we believed in transparent, open processes. I cannot support back-room machinations. We should take this to the all-hands meeting.
- Alice: Fine.
- ... (a week passes)
- Bob: I need you to sign off on this purchase order.
- Alice: I think we should refer this to the committee.
- Bob: But we obviously need this widget for the project.
- Alice: I thought you were all about open and transparent processes?

Why does it work? The answer is rather subtle.

In the civilized parts of our world today, we normally don't settle disputes with fists or yelling anymore. We pretend that everybody is reasonable, and therefore resort to reason, at least on the surface.

Now reasoning is a mechanical process only for simplistic computer programs. For humans, it is a matter of pulling out favored patterns of argumentation from a playbook in memory. Our plays may have been actually thought through and appropriately deployed sometime in distant memory, but mostly, when we deploy a "reasoning" play, we're engaging in a pure stimulus-response behavior. We vaguely recognize a situation, and trot out a favorite argument that we've used to "win" before, with some hasty adaptation. Often, our plays are learned via imitation, and have never been examined at all.

The key here is the association with "winning." In human social interaction, winning is rarely about the facts or the truth. It is usually about ending an interaction in a preferred status relationship ("I am better than you" or "I am worse than you"). Whether the preferred outcome is reinforcing the *status quo* or establishing a new status pattern, winning or losing is defined in terms of status.

But the interesting thing is that real arguments do nothing to status. Status is a matter of social perception. Winning a chess game might raise your status among geeks and lower it among jocks. So when you use an argument to score a status win, there's a very strong chance that it isn't a real argument at all, but a rationalization.

With complicated arguments, it can be hard to figure out the details of exactly where reasoning stops and rationalization begins. But you don't need to figure it out. All you need to do is note whether status changes as the result of a given argument. If it does, you can file it away, because used in reverse, it will cause the reverse status change.

In the example above, Bob used the "open and transparent" argument (inferring the consequences of assumed shared values in disingenuous ways to score a cheap point and occupy the moral high ground). Alice filed away the pattern and reversed it when it suited her. The tactic works not because the reasoning pattern is strong but because it is weak. You could challenge

such a pattern the moment you spot it, and enter into a long argument. Or you could just file it away to use as a petard later.

Many sitcom plots are entirely driven by status see-saws caused by hoist-by-own-petard dynamics.

The nice thing is that even though the argument is weak, your opponent will not want to attack it, since doing so would undermine their own previous use of the tactic. This helps create cultures of consensus around bullshit arguments that nobody wants to call out. But you can raise your own game by only using such weak logic in such petard-hoist defenses, and developing your own logical patterns much more carefully, avoiding any arguments that could be used against you later. This requires honesty and self-awareness. Not everybody can answer the key question: am I making this argument to achieve a favorable status outcome for myself or to arrive at a real truth? Note that I have nothing against status-movement goals. They are in fact the bread and butter of Slightly Evil thinking. It's just that reason is a very dangerous, double-edged tool to use when playing status games. Use other tools.

As a rule of thumb, useless arguments that move status without discovering truths are most often found in the application of unexamined “values.” Such values are rarely about profound moral positions. They are more often a crutch for lazy thinkers.

Crisis Non-Response

The British *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*^{*} television shows are gold mines for Slightly Evil. I recently watched the entire series again, and re-read the books, after nearly 20 years, and was astonished by how modern the humor still seems. There is even a superb episode about a bank bailout. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the shows, they track the rising fortunes of Jim Hacker, who goes from being “Minister for Adminstrative Affairs” in the first show, to the Prime Minister’s office. The premise of the show is the constant battle between Hacker and the bureaucratic civil service. For those of you familiar with my *Gervais Principle*[†] series, the picture painted is of an inverted MacLeod hierarchy: Members of Parliament are the losers, ministers of the Crown are the clueless, and the civil service contains the sociopaths. But unlike *The Office*, the main characters are not pure examples of the archetypes. Hacker occasionally wins via a streak of sociopathy, while the civil service occasionally loses through cluelessness.

In the episode “A Victory for Democracy”, we find a description of how the British Foreign Office deployed a well-thought out “creative inertia” strategy to not respond to a crisis. The strategy involves four stages. You can try using this the next time you want to avoid action. From the book:

“The standard Foreign Office response to any crisis is:

- Stage One: We say nothing is going to happen
- Stage Two: We say that something may be going to happen, but we should do nothing about it
- Stage Three: We say that maybe we should do something about it, but there’s nothing we can do
- Stage Four: We say that maybe there was something we could have done but it’s too late now.”

Sound familiar?

In the episode, this strategy is adopted by the civil service to resist Hacker's attempts to get Britain to intervene in an impending communist coup on a Commonwealth island. (Hacker wants to intervene in order to score points with the Americans, while the civil service wants to avoid acting because of some Middle Eastern implications)

Hacker, in this case, outmaneuvers the civil service via a *fait accompli*, sending an airborne battalion to the island on a goodwill mission via the Defense Ministry, without letting the Foreign Office catch on. That's generally the best way to respond to such stalling: a *fait accompli*. If you try to argue at any stage, you've already lost because the whole point of the strategy is to waste time until it is too late. If you want to actually use this stalling strategy, keep an eye on your flanks.

I'll share more juicy bits from this rich source on this list occasionally, but I strongly recommend you watch the shows and read the book versions, which are not straight transcripts; the stories are presented slightly differently via texts of memos and internal documents.

The Hierarchy of Deceptions

To function as a human being, you are forced to accept a minimum level of deception in your life. The more complex and challenging your life, the higher this minimum. If you live a quiet and conventional family life, you may never be challenged beyond the problem of whether to tell your kid the truth about Santa Claus. If you are President of the United States, your moral intelligence is going to be tested a lot more severely. The journey on the path of Slightly Evil deception begins with your attitude towards lying, but ends up at Russian roulette.

The Principle of Conservation of Deception

Can the minimum level of deception in your life go to zero? Every time I encounter somebody who swears by a philosophy of absolute honesty, I invariably discover later that they've been deceiving themselves, and often others as well, subconsciously. This observation inspired me to make up a conjecture: the principle of conservation of deception: *at any given level of moral and intellectual development, there is an associated minimum level of deception in your life.* If you aren't deceiving others, you are likely deceiving yourself. Or you're in denial.

You can only lower the level of deception in your life through further intellectual and moral development. In other words you have to *earn* higher levels of truth in your life. This actually takes intelligence, not just pious intentions.

Perhaps there is an ideal of moral and cognitive genius where you can function without deception at all. I haven't met anyone at this level, but I often come across people who recognize the principle of conservation of deception, and seem to be consciously working to lower the amount of deception in their lives.

The Anatomy of Deception

The question of deception arises when you are in a situation where you have a skill or information advantage over another decision-maker. How you use that advantage depends on four things: alignment of intentions, your relationship to the other party, the relative value of a win to the two parties, and the degree of moral certainty you have about your intentions. Let's get the first three out of the way, since they are easier to understand as simple calculations.

On the one extreme, where there is a strong alignment of intentions, a good relationship, and a desire to see the other party win, you have a parent lying to make a problem simpler for a child and secretly helping him/her succeed. On the other extreme, which is completely adversarial in both intentions and relationship, and you stand to benefit much more, you pull out all stops to win. Whatever the situation, you can use both your information advantage and skill advantage towards the appropriate outcome.

Deception is very nearly an amoral behavior. There are “good” lies: little white lies, nurturing lies, and complicity in the larger polite fictions of society. And there are “bad” lies that help you inflict as much destruction as possible. But on the whole, deception is fundamentally friendlier to evil. So any use of deception is at least slightly evil.

The Hierarchy of Deceptions

I find it very useful to think in terms of a hierarchy of deception skills, from the least sophisticated to the most sophisticated. The less sophisticated ones are harder to justify than the more sophisticated ones, which is reason enough to increase your sophistication level.

The least sophisticated form of deception is *outright lying* and fabrication of evidence.

A slightly more sophisticated form of deception is *misdirection*. You don't lie, but you foreground a pattern of true information that is likely to lead to false conclusions.

Next you get *withholding of information*. You don't lie or misdirect, but you don't necessarily share any information that you don't have to.

Next, you get *equivocation*, or sharing of information in ambiguous ways. This allows you to maintain plausible deniability against charges of lying, misdirection or withholding information, and relies on the predisposition of the other party to draw certain conclusions over others.

At the final level of sophistication, you get *not-correcting-others*. You don't lie, misdirect, withhold or equivocate. But when others are drawing false conclusions that you could correct if you chose to (or missing inferences that are obvious to you due to your greater skill), you selectively choose not to help them out. If they make no mistakes and miss nothing, you've given your entire advantage away, though.

There is progressive minimalism and (social and moral) defensibility of means in this hierarchy. I am not a lawyer, so I'd be curious to hear from the lawyers among you, about the legal defensibility of different levels of deception. Outright lying is obviously perjury, while not-correcting-others would appear to be entirely defensible.

The more sophisticated techniques are harder to use. They take less energy (both to use initially, and to cover up if discovered later), but more skill. How you use all these techniques to compete in adversarial situations should be obvious. It is harder to see how you would use any of the skills to help another party. When you get good at not-correcting-others in helpful ways, you become a good teacher.

Moral Certainty

Any sort of deception, to be justifiable within your personal morality, needs to be driven by a certain amount of moral certainty regarding your own

intentions.

Fortunately, life is deliciously interesting: the question of deception often comes up precisely when you are not entirely sure that you are morally in the right. To make the analysis simple, let's assume a deterministic situation at the extremes: you have a certain decisive advantage. If you used it, you'd win for sure. If you gave it away entirely, you'd lose for sure. In between, your likelihood of winning depends on how much of the advantage you cede. If you cede half the advantage, you are leaving the outcome to fate.

How much of your advantage should you give away when you are morally unsure about your position? I assert that you should give away the advantage in direct proportion to the amount of doubt you feel. Not only does this seem fair in some cosmic sense, but it is also a great way to prevent moral doubt from paralyzing you to the point that you don't act at all.

I think this is the reason behind the appeal of the familiar trope of a movie villain who sets up games of chance when he doesn't have to. You have a revolver, a decisive advantage, but you choose to play Russian roulette with your opponent, rather than shooting him outright. Often, such villains, whose actions reflect a fundamental grappling with moral doubt, are more interesting than the heroes who live in a world of moral righteousness.

Personally, I almost never lie outright these days. To the extent possible, I try to turn moral ambiguity into Russian roulette.

The Art of Damage Control

Being Slightly Evil means you are looking to live the gambler's life: placing bets and taking risks. If you win, you get a lot more for your efforts than drones who merely work hard. The downside is that you can and will fail on occasion. And the possibility of failure leads to one of the worst pieces of advice that gets passed around (out of either cluelessness or malice aforethought):

“You must be willing to look foolish.”

Why is this bad advice? It is bad advice because it turns the manageable problem of damage control into some kind of holy cross that you must necessarily, and passively, bear. People who hand out this piece of advice typically do so while striking a pious, quasi-religious pose. They make it sound as though looking foolish were necessary atonement for your sins of risk-taking.

Certainly, looking foolish is a potential consequence of failure (besides of course, other consequences such as material losses, loss of trust, credibility, friendships and so forth). “You must be willing to look foolish” is part of a more general piece of advice, “you must accept the consequences.”

No, you shouldn't.

“You must accept the consequences” is the start of a dangerous line of advice that also leads to “you should take one for the team,” *hara kiri*, captains “going down with the ship,” and other (usually unnecessary) acts of martyrdom. There are times and places when honor and such noble acts of self-sacrifice might be appropriate (usually actual battlefields are involved), but they are truly rare. Most of the time, nobody needs to die.

You should certainly accept that failure is imminent the moment the signs are clear. When the writing's on the wall, it is time to quit fighting for success. But that doesn't mean it is time to switch into noble passivity,

waiting for the blow to fall. You are not a defendant awaiting trial (unless you've actually broken the law). It is time to rapidly shift into damage control mode. There are no holy judges out there watching to see if karmic justice is done, and waiting to applaud your noble actions. Only gleeful onlookers enjoying their moment of *schadenfreude*, other evil and slightly evil people furiously looking for an opportunity in your fall, and well-intentioned compassionate souls eager to commiserate and tempt you into passivity when you need to be active. If you are involved in a big enough failure, there will also be an angry mob baying for your blood very soon. And yes, there are potential innocent and hapless fallout victims who will soon pose a moral quandary for you.

As a principal in a risky endeavor, unless you are prone to denial, you'll realize that failure is unavoidable long before others do. This means you have the most time and control over consequences, which includes a degree of control over how, where and when others find out what's happening, and how they react.

Damage control means predicting the unmanaged course of events, designing interventions to minimize fallout, and optimally distributing the residual impact among all exposed parties. This means trading off impact on trust, credibility, and future opportunities. It means salvaging material assets. And yes: it means deciding how foolish you can afford to look. Looking foolish is serious business. Reputations take a long time to establish and minutes to lose. Of all potential consequences, "looking foolish" is the most damaging. You can rebuild assets, re-establish trust and credibility and find life-lines and future opportunities in even the worst chaos. But once people start thinking of you as "foolish," you've put yourself in a pigeonhole that is very hard to climb out of. Depending on the situation, you may be able to buy back 10 units of lost trust with 1.5 units of looking foolish. These calculations must be made. The do-nothing defaults will be unfavorable, especially because others will shift into active damage control mode, the moment they find out, even if you don't.

Now, if you are really smart, the optimal hit will not be negative at all. You'll find a way to play a failure so you not only escape all adverse consequences, but perhaps actually come out looking good.

Why is this Slightly Evil? Because there's a slippery slope to True Evil. A basic truth about risk management is that old saw, "success has many parents, while failure is an orphan." If there's a win, you fight for as much of a share as you can (for yourself, or for a broader group whose interests you represent). If there's a failure, you rush to dissipate consequences as widely and as far away from yourself as possible. The path to true evil lies in your power to make innocents – scapegoats and fall guys – suffer the worst of the consequences. For many, damage control is pretty much the same as figuring out who can most safely be blamed. And the people who are easiest to hurt (and also the last to find out) are typically the most innocent (there is rarely anyone who is truly innocent; every stakeholder is complicit in a failure to some extent).

You cannot be all noble and rise above the fray of the blame game. When a true failure looms, you must play or be played. As always, you decide where to draw your lines in the sand. And sometimes yes, you may well decide to shoulder more than your share of the burden out of altruism. But it better be calculated rather than clueless altruism.

Disrupting an Adversary

On Annoying Others

Wanting to be liked is a significant need that must be overcome on the slightly evil path. It is not enough to learn to take criticism with a stiff-faced smile. You must become comfortable with actively provoking and then dealing with dislike. The first step is to learn how to be annoying without any purpose in mind. That's the

learning, practice and play stage. Then there's a danger zone: you can get addicted to button-pushing *schadenfreude* for the hell of it. Feeding your self-esteem by baiting others is as limiting as feeding it by fishing for compliments. There's a reason both those idioms arise from the same fishing metaphor. They are about behaviors at the same level. Those who get addicted are the lifelong contrarians and trolls-without-a-cause.

At some point smart people simply start ignoring the bait, and the contrarians are reduced to baiting idiots, which is neither entertaining nor valuable.

But once you've learned how to be annoying for no reason, and avoided the temptations of the danger zone, you can graduate to being selectively annoying in calibrated ways when you have a good reason. Why would you ever want to do that? Quite simply, because people who are in

an annoyed state behave more predictably than those who are in a non-annoyed state, where they are actually thinking. If you ever need to stop somebody from thinking too much about something, and more benign methods like flattery, distraction or avoidance fail, you escalate by being annoying.

It is far easier, and far more valuable, to annoy people using their strengths, than by using their weaknesses. In fact, you cannot really annoy

people by attacking their weaknesses. You can only insult them and buy anger and resentment that might come back to bite you in the form

of vindictiveness. When you annoy people using their strengths on

the other hand, they tend to get frustrated with themselves, rather than angry at you. And while annoyance usually fades (unless you

reinforce it into a permanent state – the danger zone above), insults get

carved in stone. And best of all, causing annoyance is a tactic that can neutralize people's *most* effective behaviors, when they are not in your best interests.

This phenomenon is part of a broader phenomenon I've talked about before: all arrested development is caused by strengths, not weaknesses. If you get too good at something, you get addicted to those rewards, and your behavior around that strength gets predictable, even if highly effective.

To be truly effective, you must select strength vectors where you personally are much weaker than your target (or can appear much weaker because you've managed to make them underestimate you). In fact

that's the source of this whole bag of tricks: all annoyance tactics are derived from the *natural* behaviors of stupid, illogical, uncreative and unintuitive people, and rely on the mechanics of the Dunning-Kruger effect.

^{*} The only difference is that in their natural form, these are typically poorly-timed lash out/bite back behaviors that arise from threats to self-esteem. In their deliberate form, the tactics are used when you want to achieve specific effects.

Derailing the Data-Driven

In the *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister* TV

shows of the 80s, the Whitehall bureaucrats Humphrey Appleby and Bernard Wooley kept the hapless minister (and later, Prime Minister) Jim Hacker trapped between a rock and a hard place: they would either flood him with so much information that he couldn't find what he needed to know, or withhold so much, it wasn't there for him to find. By effectively combining filtration tactics with distraction tactics based on irrelevant information, the bureaucrats managed to keep the reins in their own hands. In information wars, filters are power and useless data are weapons.

This general approach to manipulation relies on the fundamental relationship between data and decisions. New tactics are becoming available in our digital age.

When two parties have divergent agendas, the party that controls data flows is usually the one that wins. To control how a decision is framed and made, you have to control the data flows that feed into that decision. This requires two levels of work. First, you have to *frame* the decision. This step determines which data are deemed important and relevant. Second, you have to hide some data and exaggerate the importance of other data. Framing is a more powerful lever, since by perversely misframing a decision, you can send someone down a completely irrelevant bunny trail and give them the illusion of choice. For example, if you know that for a given question, the opinions of parents matter more than those of teachers, encouraging your opponent to design a survey to target teachers to distract him/her (preferably a detailed survey to be administered at a teacher conference in 6 months rather than a quick one conducted online next week), will win you an advantage.

But if you cannot completely distract somebody from the important data flows, you need to learn the basics of data judo, so they end up doing the wrong things with the right data.

In Hacker's day (the show is set in the 80s), this general approach to manipulation relied on the paper version of information overload/scarcity.

Overload meant Hacker would have to process multiple boxes of papers every night. The bureaucrats would hide the important papers deep inside the last box (a tactic also favored by defendants in class-action lawsuits, where the discovery phase results in huge piles of mostly useless data). He'd be so tired by the time he got to them late at night, he'd sign without looking (later in the show, Hacker wakes up to this tactic).

Hacker's mistake lay in delegating the determination of "important" to his nominal underlings. If he felt overwhelmed with data, he'd complain of information overload and tell his staff to only give him the *most* important papers to read. If he felt important things were being kept from him, he'd demand that he be kept in the loop about *everything*.

In data flows, there is no real protection against manipulation by people with more privileged and direct access to data, (it's like being the lower riparian state along the course of a river) but you can do better than Hacker. You can set explicit relevance criteria for example: "send me everything about issue X, but leave me out of the loop on issue Y."

That at least escalates the game, since hiding information from a relevance filter is tougher than hiding it from a generic "importance"

filter.

But enough about 80s style information-based manipulation. We are in the 2010s now, with several generations of information technology between us and the Jim Hacker age.

The equivalent of Jim Hacker in the 2010s is the self-styled "data-driven"

decision-maker. I first started encountering the term around 2006, when "analytics" was starting to catch on as a buzzword. The typical clueless

data-driven decision-maker (call him/her a CDDD) has the following characteristics:

- Often has a background in a process discipline such as six sigma.
- Loves anything with a statistical cachet to it, like “A/B testing” or “ARIMA model.”
- Often has some very rudimentary training in statistics and probability theory.
- Conflates more sophisticated analysis with more useful results.
- Confuses precision with accuracy (this usually shows up as worry about data quality while forgetting about data relevance).
- Is often a formula geek rather than somebody who actually looks at specific numbers.
- Is vastly more confident and secure in his/her clueless state compared to his paper-driven predecessors.

The last two elements are particularly important. By “formula geek,” I mean someone who has only a very hazy conceptual understanding of mathematical ideas like regression and technological tools like SQL, but is able to actually *use* the tools very well, and relies on them to provide answers and insight. They can run regressions, fit curves, talk about R-squared and even run simpler SQL queries and routine database reports. This leads to the greater sense of confidence and competence: CDDDS mistake basic understanding of more powerful tools for greater personal competence (like somebody with a car feeling more confident about their sense of direction than somebody on foot)

What they completely lack is any sense of taste about when and how to use the tools, any sense of what data is missing, and how to improvise.

They believe “drilling down” means generating more detailed reports or knowing the tricks involved in slicing data increasingly refined ways.

The truth of course, is that to “drill down” is to act like a detective following an instinctive trail of questioning in a mystery novel, based on clues that seem significant. Intuition in data-driven thinking doesn’t vanish, it merely moves from the answers to the questions. There are extremely sophisticated thinkers who simply “get” data-driven decision-making without knowing any statistics or technical details: they understand that being *intelligently* data-driven is simply about asking the right questions at the right time, which is something that takes hard thinking and a sense of timing rather than technical skills. It can be scary to watch these smart people in action. I once watched a CDDD team do a 30 minute presentation

to a smart executive, presenting tons of data and answering tons of obvious and irrelevant questions. All eye-glazing stuff. In the Q&A session, most of the tired audience simply asked dull follow-up questions that the CDDD team could easily answer. The smart executive? He cut right to the chase and asked the ONE important question that reframed the issue and made it obvious that all the data and analysis was irrelevant.

CDDDs fail in the following predictable ways:

- Failing to understand the relationship between time and data: more data is only useful if it is being generated and intelligently analyzed *faster than options are expiring* due to a ticking clock.
- Falling prey to the drunkard-and-keys effect: looking in the glare of wherever data is available, rather than where the data is actually needed, to lower risk.
- Going beyond “roughly right”: If you can eyeball a graph and notice that it is basically trending up in a rough straight line, and that’s good enough for the decision you need to make, there is no real point in doing complicated math to figure out exactly how straight it is (the key phrase is “good enough”). This is an extremely common failure mode.

A simple way to test for this is to ask “can ANY possible conclusion from this mathematical refinement exercise actually swing the decision the other way?” If the answer is no, the work is not worth doing.

- Failing to understand sampling: CDDDs understand the *technical* ideas in sampling (randomness, i.i.d, true randomness versus chain samples versus convenience samples, methodological problems with different data collection methods). But they don’t understand the far simpler framing issues in sampling. A technically perfect A/B test is completely useless if you are asking the wrong question to begin with.

All these failure modes arise from the same place: failing to actually *think* about the problem at a pre-technical level: asking the right questions and pondering the underlying assumptions and hypotheses. All these activities

are outside of the technical work of data-driven decision making. There are no formulas or processes at this framing stage.

Which brings us to the slightly evil part. If you are dealing with a CDDD

who is getting in your way, what can you do? You could of course, do the digital equivalent of too much/too little data dumping as with Jim Hacker (too much is usually far easier these days: give them a massive Excel sheet, or access to a database query interface that can do far too much, and is designed to drill down and generate reports in the wrong directions).

But the digital world offers more room for creative misdirection, overload and information hiding. The key is to recognize that CDDDs do everything they do out of risk aversion, but are hazy about *what data reduce what risks and uncertainties*. Their risk aversion also tends to be *absolute* rather than relative. CDDDs usually want the same levels of certainty around every decision, whether or not there is enough information to lower the risk to their comfort levels. This means they are in a hurry to get to the technical parts because it feels like they are accomplishing something.

So you need to encourage them in their quest for a false sense of security, and hurry them along to the technical exercises. Here are four techniques to take advantage of each of the four predictable failure modes above.

- If you know that a decision will tend towards a default option you like, if left unmade, you can suggest delaying or deferring a decision until more data is in. If the analysis supports what you wanted anyway, you look smart. If not, you can always say, “it’s too late now, we’re already committed. Second-guessing now will be very costly.”
- If you know that the actual data required to move a decision out of your gut is simply unavailable or too expensive, look for the most convenient red-herring data source. Suggest that the CDDD study *that* data source. If possible, suggest that they chair a *committee* to study that data source.
- Using this failure mode requires some technical knowledge. If you don’t care whether an upward-trending graph is a straight line,

exponential or an S-curve (all you care about is “up”), then suggest the most complex technique you can. Everybody can do linear regressions. Suggest something like “we really need to do a logistic regression here; there may be some implications if it turns out we are on an S-curve.” If your CDDD doesn’t know how to do logistic regressions, he/she will waste time studying up the subject (and enjoying it) or hunting for an expert who knows how to use the technique. More generally, sending people off on useless learning missions and digital wild-goose chases is one of the best ways to distract them from substantive issues.

- A real thinker will not move on to technical questions about sampling (“is this i.i.d?”) before thinking through the qualitative and narrative questions (“are women really the target market here?”). If you want to distract a CDDD from the important questions about a sample, scare them with methodological questions: “Are we *really* sure this time

series is i.i.d? We don't want a Black-Scholes-Mertens type Black Swan meltdown here).

Perhaps for the digital age, we need a phrase to replace “wild goose chase.” How about “black swan chase”?

Keep in mind that in some ways, being forced to use these techniques wastes useful talent. If at all possible, try and point a CDDD in a direction where they can do good. Unfortunately, this is often impossible, because of their false sense of confidence. Because they are often more competent around data tools than their peers, they mistakenly believe they are also more insightful around data in general.

Rebooting Conversations

Sometimes conversations just start off wrong. So wrong that you need to hit the reboot button. I saw a virtuoso display of conversation rebooting once. A customer at a store had run into a major mess while trying to get a return processed, and the floor staff could not help her. The manager had not yet returned from lunch. She stood there getting angrier by the minute. When the manager finally walked through the door (nursing a chilly frappuccino; very apt given what he did next), she could hold herself back no longer.

She strode up to him immediately and launched into an angry outburst: “This is just not acceptable; I’ve been waiting here fifteen minutes! I was promised...”

The manager waited for a pause in the outburst before firmly taking charge: “No, no, NO. That is not the way. Let’s start again. Hi! My name is ___, and you are?”

That took the wind out of the woman’s sails. She was forced to restart with introductions, properly embarrassed that she’d railed at a stranger without figuring out if he deserved the anger.

This was a particularly extreme example, the equivalent of sidestepping and calming down a raging bull. I don’t think my nerves would have held that steady.

But less extreme “soft reboot” situations are both more common and easier to handle. The trigger is always someone (call him/her the “bull”) coming up to you unexpectedly, in an emotionally charged state (anger, fear and sullenness are the common ones). I am only talking about casual, work and professional situations of course, not spouses, kids or parents. Cases where you have no particular obligation to be nurturing and caring (can “nurturing and caring” be an effective management style? That’s a topic for another day. Short answer, “Not if it is a simple port of parental instincts”).

Common reactions like “Whoa, whoa, calm down” or “time out, time out!” can be dangerous because you implicitly accept responsibility for being the calm and adult one, and give the bull permission to continue the tantrum. That’s a common (and often deliberate) exploit employed by the emotionally violent against those whose desire for peace and harmony is a known weakness. What you need is a reaction that gives you reboot control, but doesn’t leave you responsible for maintaining overall calm. Just your own calm. You leave the bull responsible for his/her own emotions, and you don’t take responsibility for the situation until YOU decide you want to. This also means being willing to let the situation spiral out of control with “nobody in charge” for a while, if the bull doesn’t restrain himself/herself.

The basic trick is simple: *you repeat all or part of their opening line, but with zero emotional content. Deadpan.*

This works about 80% of the time. Sometimes you may have to change an assertion into a question, either just with interrogative modulation, or by a minimalist word substitution. Here’s are a few examples:

- Bull: HAVE YOU HEARD? THIS IS BULLCRAP!
- You: This is bullshit?

- Bull: I AM NOT PUTTING UP WITH THIS! THEY’VE MOVED MY DESK TO THE BASEMENT!
- You: They’ve moved your desk to the basement?

- Bull (crying or close to it): Whha–wwhat am I going to do now? I am screwed.
- You: You’re screwed?

This works because of the basic dynamics of emotions. When faced with an emotionally charged stimulus, your own emotional reaction will race ahead and censor the options generated by your cognitive reaction. Emotional reactions to such charged stimuli can be empathetic (you are an ally, and you mirror the emotion), sympathetic (you react with a calming/moderating emotion before determining if you want responsibility for the blow-up) or complementary (for example, defensive cringing in the face of rage).

Reacting with a repetition (or a slightly modified repetition) is a cognitively lightweight operation, so it is quick enough to prevent an emotional hijacking. Depending on the situation, it can take some nerves to do the repetition drained of emotional content, but it is still a straightforward behavior to practice and learn.

What happens next? Usually, the bull will see your response as a request for elaboration. Elaboration takes coherent thinking, so he/she will be forced to slow down before saying anything more. At the same time, you've substituted your emotionally neutral repetition for the charged opening, as the stimulus to respond to. The train of thought that starts in your head will be less constrained. Most importantly, you don't end up with responsibility for the developing situation before you decide if you want it.

When this does not work, it is usually because the bull will displace the strong emotion towards you ("don't f\$@%\$@ just repeat what I say, I am MAD" or "How can you just sit there?"), but by then, you've bought yourself a favorable reaction-start point even if the bull continues the charge.

Case Studies

The Game of Hallway Chicken

You've probably played the game of Hallway Chicken. That uncomfortable little dance you do when you need to maneuver around somebody going the other way in a hallway or lobby. Unlike the game of chicken on roads or in conflict, where you win by not being the first to give way, in Hallway Chicken, you win by being the first to give way, but doing so in a status-enhancing way so you appear gracious. Be honest – such encounters aren't just practical problems. You feel either a small social win or loss each time.

The key to giving way graciously, as it happens, is to *slow your movements down to below the walking tempo of the oncomer*. This is a status win because slow movements are associated with higher status. Happily, it is also a good way to actually solve the collision-avoidance problem efficiently.

It's a mathematical thing, and it's easiest to explain via an analogy to dropped phone calls in the days before call waiting. When a call is dropped, if both parties try to call back immediately, they'll both get busy signals (the equivalent of moving in the same direction in Hallway Chicken). One known method for resolving such conflicts is to simply wait a random period before trying again. If you get a busy signal, you wait a longer random period. This protocol solves the problem quickly and efficiently (it may even be optimal in some sense, I forgot my long-ago technical introduction to this problem). Electrical engineers actually design such slow-down protocols to re-establish dropped connections in communication networks.

Explaining why this works takes some tedious probability theory, but the point is, slowing down leads to a resolution of the collision avoidance problem. If one party slows down while the other continues to dance side-to-side rapidly, the dancer will more likely be the one to get the right of way, generally the lower-status outcome.

It takes some practice to adopt this behavior, because in a given physical environment, people generally go with the flow and walk at a given pace or faster. Not slower. So Hallway Chicken situations typically start with roughly matched tempos. Besides consciously training yourself to instantly slow down in hallway encounters, you can also just try walking with slower, longer strides.

For homework, consider another everyday walking-around situation that can turn into a status thing: the problem of if, how, and how long to hold a door open when people are coming through behind you. We'll see in the next chapter a discussion of some solutions to this problem.

Door-Holding and Illegible Queues

Let's analyze the status dynamics of the game of Holding Doors Open. I challenged a few friends to come up with their own analyses. I am sharing four in edited form here, with the full names withheld (I don't want to accidentally out someone as a practitioner of the Slightly Evil arts). You will find my own view (and I make no claims to my own solution being the best) at the end.

The 3-Second Rule

First up, EB has a very systematic answer that starts with his notion of a 3-second rule:

I've always reduced the door-holding problem to the "3 second rule". If the person behind you is more than 3 seconds away from the door, you don't have to hold it. Now I realize it's more complicated than that. For example:

- You lose status if you fail to hold the door within the 3 seconds, or extend the hold too long
- When a person holds a door for you, you are expected to walk faster even if carrying a lot of stuff
- People who do not speed up for a held door lose status
- If you are male, and the person behind you is male, the 3 second rule becomes fairly rigid
- If you are male, and the person behind you is female, the 3 second rule becomes relaxed and extends to about 5 seconds
- Rules are greatly relaxed when the next person is carrying so many things that opening the door would be problematic.
- Here's an interesting one...given a stream of people, if you hold the door for one person, the next male behind you is obligated to take over the door holding until he is relieved by another male or the stream ends
- A male who fails in his obligation in rule 7 (streaming) loses status

I don't entirely agree with the conclusions (in cases 3 and 8, I am not sure the offender loses status for example), but nevertheless, it is a very interesting breakdown.

Swing Direction, Air Locks and Other Subtleties

BE's answer is more of a narrative analysis that raises more questions than it answers, than a set of rules. Some of BE's answers conflict with EB's (how's that for symmetry)?

The Swing Direction Matters

Gaining status in 1:1 situations sometimes depends on the direction the door opens and depending on relative status before the encounter, may require being the one to open or having the door opened for you. When the number of people and doors involved increases, everything changes. The trickiest situation is the air-lock vestibule, where you enter a building through a set of doors, take a few steps and then have to go through a second set of doors.

What Women Don't Know

Custom in the US dictates that gallant gentlemen should open doors for ladies. Have you noticed how few women know that once they step into the vestibule they are supposed to take a step to the side in order for the guy to enter and open the next door? Time and again I watch these awkward moments at restaurants where one or the other doesn't know how to solve for this situation. On a date, status can be lost by failing to perform this dance properly, but I'm not sure status can (or should) be gained or leveled. The same is not true in the business environment.

Air-lock Slam Dunk

I walk fast and tend to be the pace-setter when walking with co-workers. When walking with just one other person, as we near the type of [air lock] entrance I just described, I slow down enough to let the person pass me, and then I step aside so they can open the second door for me as well. A completely unambiguous status statement. When walking with a larger group, I slow down to the third position, so I can be the first one completely through without holding any doors for anyone.

And if you find yourself in the situation that I described where the person is waiting for you to open the second set of doors for them, you can somewhat re-level status by going through the second door and continuing on without making any effort to actually hold it for the other person.

Making the Favor Explicit

G approaches the problem from the point of view of negative and positive payoff scenarios. I wont quote his full answer, but he makes one very interesting point about the value of making the favor explicit:

Hold the door briefly, but transfer the effort to someone (preferably male) in the other party as they come through. Offer a genuine smile, say “Got it?” and, if time allows and the other group is appealing in some way, I engage the group after they enter behind me (+++ if this turns into a social win for my group and theirs). Why does this work?

It makes the favor explicit; they can't help but follow your direction and there is at least a small status loss any time a man does what a stranger tells him to. You get to be the one offering politeness, the first one to speak and have the option to reopen the interaction after you are all inside. This is the prerogative of someone with higher status.

Culture Matters

RB points out that the local culture is very important in determining the status dynamics.

In regard to opening doors...I'm a southern boy. I was raised to always hold doors for anyone who comes along as I'm going in a door. But I have to admit that I usually use an approximate of 20ish yards to determine if I should hold the door for people far behind me. Women present an interesting situation these days. On a few occasions I've been asked if I was holding the door for a woman just because she is a woman. To that I respond, "No, Ma'am. I'm holding the door for you because I'm a gentleman." A little snarky, I admit, but I think it's rude, anyway, to question the motive for generosity with something as simple as opening a door.

The Natural Time Constant Rule

In contrast to EB's 3-second rule, KB has a sort of natural time constant rule, which I think is more sophisticated.

If the other person is going in the same direction as I am I will hold the door only if I believe they will get to the door before it would fall closed naturally. My feeling is that one gains status by taking a moment to be gracious. However, one could lose status by appearing too eager to appear gracious. On the flip side, not holding the door gives leaves a poor impression.

The other, and I find more awkward, way one can have this situation come up is when the parties are travelling opposite directions (one entering, one exiting). In these cases I always defer to the other party. Both parties are present so one can always appear gracious by being willing to delay themselves momentarily. This situation can become awkward when both parties are trying the same strategy. I'm not sure what the right move is here, but what I personally opt to do is allow them to be gracious both to

avoid an impasse and I do get a minor feeling of status gain because while I have offered to be gracious, I do actually have somewhere to be.

My Solution

My solution is driven more by sheer laziness than any desire to have fun with status games. I'd distill my unconscious policy down to five heuristics.

- If the door pulls open towards me and there are people coming the other way, I simply step aside and hold the door open.
- If the door pulls open on the other side and there are people coming the other way, I wait for them to pass through. If one of them holds the door open, I pass through, but this is sort of rare. People seem to manage one-way situations in batches.
- If there are people behind me (whichever way the door opens), I do the “relay handoff” if the person is right behind me (holding the door propped open while passing through, rather than from the side). If there are more than a few paces behind me, I just give the door an extra hard shove as I pass through, so that the swing-shut is delayed. The latter is a bit callous, since the follower has to hurry to catch the door before it swings shut, but I don't have to wait for the person. I get points for trying, but don't really have to slow down.
- If I am with a group I know, and am out in front, I just hold the door open for everybody. If somebody else is doing that, I pass through with a nod, but never offer to take over.
- If it is an old, physically disabled or over-burdened-with-stuff person, I hold the door open always. This one is really a practical reciprocity norm rather than a status ritual. Anyone who doesn't do this comes off looking both socially inept and inconsiderate in a childish way.

I hadn't really thought about the two-door/vestibule situation. I think there's no really elegant solution there. It is just a physically awkward situation.

An Exercise for the Reader: Illegible Queues

One morning, I was third in line for coffee at Starbucks. It was one of those lines where the person ahead of me was standing a little too far back, and as the third person, I had to set the line direction, but couldn't do so with complete clarity.

A somewhat self-important looking guy came up behind me, but stood in the middle of the “ambiguous zone” where, if the person at the register hasn't been paying attention, it will not be clear who is next.

I've observed this move many times. It is something just short of cutting in line (which is very rare in America today at least). It is ambiguous challenge/attempt to fork the queue, but there is room for plausible deniability (“Oh, I didn't realize you were in line”). The situation is exacerbated in cases where multiple lines converge into a single line at a service location, and creating and manipulating “queue illegibility” can get you a couple of jumps ahead.

There is also a cultural angle in this case. Crowded countries tend to have very close-together queueing norms, and what might seem like cutting in line in a high-personal-space country can be a genuine misunderstanding in a low-personal-space country.

What's your take on the dynamics here? What's the difference in risk/reward structure between this kind of move and outright cutting in line? What are the available defenses if you are faced with this situation?

Napping in the Trenches

I occasionally give advice to people, if their case seems compelling enough. Kai had one such case—a subtle existential question masquerading as a banal lifestyle design question:

I'm 26 with a background in economics and marketing. Until recently, I was the director of marketing with a large construction company. I'm a recently self-employed guy. I have really reasonable expenses (between rent, small student loans, and a small car payment, I'm about \$2,000/mo). Between consulting work (website development, marketing strategy, and business development) and a few side projects (iPhone recycling via eBay) my expenses are covered. But I keep freaking out that I'm not doing enough. I'm covering my bases with 15hrs/wk of work which is exactly what I've wanted for the last few years, but **my days are filled with a bit of dread that I should be working harder, doing more, and trying to earn at a higher level.** ...I haven't had to dip into my savings. I'm meeting my needs. I landed a nice consulting contract with a startup. Things are going really well, but...**Part of my head keeps saying I should be freaked out.**

In Kai's email, the bits in bold are what jumped out at me. That's the heart of the matter. The rest is just situational detail.

Let's see if we can help Kai relax a bit.

This dread is certainly something I've experienced (and continue to experience) personally, and heard other people describe. If you haven't experienced it, you're either lying or clueless.

To set up a model for Kai's problem, imagine a 2x2 with scripted and unscripted on the X-axis, and failure and success on the Y-axis. In the paycheck world, you have scripts for both success and failure that tell you how to behave and react. Success comes with specific rewards that you've already been conditioned to process, and there is a lot of social support to help you deal with it. You sort of know how to behave when you get married, get promoted to VP, have a first kid, or get a big bonus. It's like

going to one of those arcades where you earn tickets from games and can trade them at the counter for items from a fixed menu of prizes. Or playing a video game. Failure is similar. There are standardized consolation prizes, safety nets, coping scripts and strategies. In both cases, you can tell when you aren't being given your due (unlucky), or when you are being over-rewarded (lucky). You have a *narrative frame of reference* to make sense of events in your life and calibrate your responses to them. Sure, each new event is new *for you*, but you can rely on the experiences of others who've been through the same thing.

But in the unscripted part of the world of work that free agents inhabit, there are far fewer behaviors to imitate, no well-tested scripts, and few social cues helping you calibrate success/failure and suggesting appropriate behaviors. If you're actually failing (failing to make rent for example), the problem is quite simple. At some point you'll run out of money no matter how low your burn rate, and end up having to head back to the scripted world or spiral down into a homeless shelter.

The problem is with success. You have enough to continue indefinitely, with a little discretionary surplus that allows you to think beyond the next rent check. And that's where the trouble starts.

You're not quite sure how to calibrate your response to your evolving situation. You don't know quite what to do with your surplus. You could try and imitate the scripts of the paycheck world, but you've probably already discredited them in your own mind (and may not qualify anyway: try getting a mortgage on a volatile equivalent of a steady paycheck that would easily get you a mortgage).

To take a very simple example, when you are living off volatile cash flows and managing "personal" and "business" investments dynamically in a mixed way, all those retirement planning calculators are useless. You have to be constantly be deciding whether a cash surplus goes into your retirement account, or whether you'd be better off investing it in growing your business in some way. What's a better bet? An insight you have about Netflix stock, or an idea for an app you can work on? In the paycheck world, you never have to choose between those sorts of options. They are generally sealed off from each other.

This concern isn't limited to bootstrapped lives that seem to eternally endure, a slim margin away from collapse. Even radical success doesn't make this lack of narrative structure go away. When things are absolutely booming, you have to face the terror of the thought that it may be a transient success that could vanish as quickly as it appeared. The question then becomes, *this is too good to last; am I making enough hay while the sun is shining?* Or, *where can I safely put this cash I am spinning right now?*

So what do you do? The key to the answer is one word: *insurance*. Insurance is the idea that drives script building and behaviors for those who lack a script to deal with the rewards of success.

I encountered this idea recently, from a couple of different sources, that the law of diminishing marginal utility does not apply to money because there is a category of uses for money (buying insurance) that don't diminish in value no matter how much you have. When you are poor, with no surplus, you get your free tetanus shot at the community clinic and try to avoid getting sick. Then you get health insurance. Then you get life insurance. Then you start college savings accounts for your kids. On the business front, you start new projects, you fret about existing projects hitting end-of-life, you wonder if you should diversify. All of it is insurance-thinking. You wonder if dollar devaluation will make your \$5 million stash worthless in the next financial crisis. You fret about the most secure place to stash what you have.

The insurance-dominated script building can sometimes show up in a disguised form as experience maximization: you become afraid, not of bad things happening, but missing out on *good* things. But as the idea of the bucket list demonstrates, fear of "missing out" is simply another manifestation of insurance-driven thinking. If you had all the time in the world, missing out wouldn't be a worry.

So why isn't the insurance bought with dollar _{$n+1$} worth less than the insurance bought with dollar _{n} ? Because in an open world, you cannot actually estimate probabilities of various scenarios and rationally arrange to buy insurance in the order of decreasing likelihood of various scenarios.

Because there are unknown unknowns that aren't even on your list, let alone modeled and rank-ordered by likelihood estimates. Heck, even for *known* risks, you can only raise or lower risks in relative ways, not absolute ways. If you avoid flying, you can still get killed in a plane crash if the plane crashes into your house. Underground bunker? Maybe the crashed plane will release a deadly toxin that seeps in.

There's a fable in Indian mythology that gets at this. A rich and powerful king wants to be immortal, and gets the gods to grant him a boon. But they don't offer him immortality, just an insurance policy with explicit clauses. So he asks for and is granted, the following policy: he cannot be killed by day or night, by human or beast, neither indoors nor outdoors, and so forth. Clever, huh? And of course, he gets killed by a half-man-half-lion at dusk, on a doorstep. Talk about black swans.

This process never ends. You can keep imagining things that could go wrong and destroy the quality of life you've achieved (or limit the things you could "miss out" on), and keep spending to secure it better against an infinite universe of uncertainty. That's why rich people (in my experience) are usually *more* careful with their money than poor people. Sure, they may splurge on luxuries (that's their idea of rewarding themselves with a specific lifestyle), but that spending is just the spending on the lifestyle. They save the bulk of their wealth for increasingly complex forms of *insurance* to *preserve* those achieved lifestyles. The richer you get, the more lifestyle design becomes lifestyle insurance.

Hedge funds, cabins in the Wyoming mountains, offshore bank accounts, a private jet on standby to fly you to a safe haven on a secret private island in case the world ends and zombies run amok, cryogenic self-freezing, and the ultimate holy grail of insurance: immortality-seeking. That isn't just Mr. Burns of *The Simpsons*. That's more real rich people than you might think, starting with John D. Rockefeller (who strove mightily to live past a hundred, but failed at 98) to Ray Kurzweil today, who reportedly takes 150 health supplements a day in the hope of living long enough to see the Singularity arrive, so he can upload his brain into cyberspace where it can survive for eternity and beat entropy (he still has to hope multiple

simultaneous earthquakes don't take out all the datacenters where iKurzweil is stored).

If you ever wondered why your rich friend blows money on a \$1000 bottle of wine at dinner, but goes all Scrooge on you if you ask for \$1000 to help you build your app, it's not entirely resentment at being considered a soft touch, or fear of being taken advantage of. It's also because the \$1000 bottle of wine is merely an element of the designed lifestyle he/she is trying to *preserve* against scenarios via insurance. What's better than a \$1000 bottle of wine? Why, the ability to keep drinking that \$1000 bottle of wine even in the event of a zombie apocalypse or the Skynet Hunter-Killers chasing you. That \$1000 isn't in the diminishing marginal utility zone. It actually represents millions in *expected costs*, against a space of scenarios being insured against. Buying a lifetime supply of your favorite wine is merely the first step. Then you have to put some cases in your bunker on your private island in Greece. Then you have to buy anti-aircraft guns for your island. And a nuclear reactor. And a fall-out shelter in case the nuclear reactor suffers a meltdown. And install a private computer network that Skynet cannot get into.

I fully sympathize, by the way. We all think the same way, just not on such a grand scale.

To put this on our 2x2 matrix, when you have no "reasonable" story (reasonable in the sense of "everybody else is following that script" whether or not it is actually sensible), your anxieties are limited only by your imagination. The paycheck-scripted, by the way, aren't immune to such anxieties. They just find security and comfort in numbers. Collective scripts are more naturally self-limiting. They don't spiral out of control to zombie insurance as easily. If everybody around you accepts a pattern of insurance, no matter how irrational, you feel safe accepting it yourself and relaxing.

But to bring it down to the world of people like Kai, you and me, making ends meet and wondering if we're doing enough, both the millionaire's situation and our own reflect age-old anxieties about mortality.

A simple and stark motif for this is a soldier in the trenches of World War I.

Imagine being this soldier. You are stuck in a boring, tedious, physically uncomfortable situation – cold, wet, eating terrible food, battling disease around you — all while dealing with ever-present death.

Ask a simple question about this soldier: *can this soldier engage in the most basic human relaxation behavior, taking a nap?*

Surprisingly, the answer is yes. Even under such extreme circumstances, you eventually hit a cognitive and physical limit and cannot devote any more intellectual resources to increasing your chances of winning and surviving. You hit a point where you let go, and take a nap.

The human condition for everybody, rich or poor, in a wartime trench or doing Internet marketing and hoping to move to Hawaii, like Kai, is the same. Whether the immediate situation is pleasant or unpleasant, the overarching reality is that all your future planning and thinking involves scripts that all end in exactly the same way: with your death.

So the answer to Kai's question: *am I doing enough?* is *always* no. There is *always* more you can do, all the way to the best available idea for immortality that happens to be around during your lifetime.

Whenever you are lucid, awake and thinking, you cannot escape the thought that the inevitability of death frames your current situation. It will frame your behaviors whether you realize it or not. The WWI soldier in the trench is always subconsciously alive to the fact that death is a careless stretch away. Whether he is smoking a cigarette, eating cold soup, or staring at a faded black and white picture of his kid, that thought is never far away.

And so is the millionaire, drinking his \$1000 bottle of wine at a fancy restaurant. Mortality may be a more distant thought, buried under more pleasant layers of distraction, but it is there. And it is the same for the desperate experience-maximizer, doing a frantic “if it’s Tuesday, it must be Brussels” tour of Europe.

But just because there is always more you can do – and you should, it is the definition of being alive in a way – does not mean you cannot take a nap.

So take that nap. Mortality will always be staring you in the face when you wake up, and you can always fret about the next bit of insurance you can buy with your next dollar when you wake up in 45 minutes. Some days, mortality will stare you in the face close up. Other days it will be a subtle and quiet note at a fun party where you're immersed in the pleasures of the moment. But it'll always be around.

I hope, Kai, that this was not an entirely useless answer. Relax, take a nap. You can get back to freaking out when you wake up.

Now I need a nap.

Pistols, at Dawn

Here is a case study on handling a work situation, from a Be Slightly Evil perspective.

K, a middle-aged single mom, who worked hard to put herself through graduate school while working a day job as an admin assistant, found a new job as sales analyst in a Fortune 500 company where big, bear-hunting teams go after multi-million-dollar corporate sales. Within the first couple of hunts, she realized that a particular senior sales guy—call him J—was treating her like a secretary. Innocuous “requests” like, “could you add this note to slide 12” and “could you clean that up before you print off copies for the client meeting” started coming her way. K did not report to J, but both reported to a sales manager T, who had a laissez-faire style. The entire sales team (which included several others, including an actual admin/editorial assistant) worked in a fluid, “collaborative” way, with group emails flying around (with the usual tactical cc’ing and backchannel sidebars). A typical modern workplace in short. J’s “requests” were never direct commands, but she found herself complying anyway, and getting stuck with tasks she used to do in her old career. And shut out of higher-value tasks that she could do and wanted to do (and had paid big education-dollars to learn to do).

K emailed me right after a particularly egregious email (part of a long straggling exchange of multiple emails) from J. She wanted to know how to respond to that email to “fix” the whole situation, and be treated with the “respect” she “deserves.”

Here are my analysis and recommendations, minus some irrelevant situational details:

There are several good ways to deal with such toxic email exchanges. K had thought of a couple of bad ones, and I could immediately see a half-dozen better ones. Unfortunately, none of them would have been particularly effective. Even worse, I could suggest a one-off response to K,

but she clearly lacked the email-fu skills to sustain the elevated level of sparring without continued babysitting. Consciously studying and improving email-fu skills in the heat of battle was not an option either. I would have done K a disservice by just suggesting a one-time tactical email band-aid. It would have merely prolonged her misery.

The problem here with K is that she forgot the first rule of dueling: as the challenged party, you need to exercise your prerogative to choose the time, place and manner of combat. That is the great advantage in being the reactor rather than the instigator. Don't choose a drunken fist-fight in a bar simply because that's where the challenge was thrown down. If pistols at dawn work better for you, choose those.

In K's case, the problem wasn't really created by J, the tactically-superior email-fu warrior. It was created by K failing to recognize the consequences of working, at her interpersonal-skills level, with the lazy, conflict-avoiding manager T, hiding poor team management skills under a facade of *laissez-faire* management. K's problem was to deal with default unfavorable perceptions (female in a male-driven workplace, with a known "secretary" history, and ingrained, easily-triggered behaviors, in compliant "administrative assistant" mode). Fighting one J at a time, one email exchange at a time would be impossibly hard. Email is a medium ideally suited to small, real-time perception corrections, achievable with a couple of sentences mixed judiciously into routine communication. It is a terrible medium for making large perception corrections or setting favorable defaults.

One ideal-case what-if is instructive to consider. K would have had a backchannel chat with T *early* in the engagement, at the very *first* sign of "secretary perception" issues, factored in T's *laissez-faire* style, and suggested that T clarify roles, responsibilities and expectations at the next planning meeting. A more thoughtful manager than T would have done something like that without being prompted.

This is still a difficult task, but at least it is merely one "crucial conversation" instead of a hundred email-fu fights between a green belt and a black belt. Handling such "perception setting" crucial conversations is an essay-length topic in itself, but I'll provide (as I provided to K) a brief hint

on how to manage those. The wrong way is to honestly explain the particular situation bothering you (“J is treating me like a secretary”). It puts you in “complaining to Mommy” mode, which all managers, *laissez-faire* ones in particular, hate. Most managers are terrible in Mommy mode, even if they sincerely want to help. It also risks poking at specific and dangerous interpersonal histories which you may not know about (J-T in this case). *One* right way, for someone like K with her level of situational information and skill, is to flatter the “management style” conceits of the particular manager and make an abstract suggestion. In this case, something like this might work: “Really like your style, and how you don’t micromanage us; I expect you’re going to do a basic roles/expectations thing at the next planning meeting, and then put us on autopilot?”

This will *not* work in all cases, but seemed like an appropriate stab given what I’d been told about T. A different T may be too lazy or scared for even this much managerial work, or need more direction and hints on K’s expectations of such a meeting. Or T may be smart enough to detect, and thin-skinned enough to take offense at, the back-seat driving and the somewhat transparent flattery implied in the “you’ve probably already thought of this” idea attribution. The point is, you can devote enough time to prepare for this conversation, pick the right attack and make it count. And you won’t have to juggle real-time operational details at the same time. If you are truly forced to “solve” a difficult interpersonal meta-problem in a reply to a specific email, while dealing with the actual work-content part of the reply, that’s a tough situation to be in. Don’t put yourself there if you can help it.

In the ideal case, if the crucial conversation had succeeded, the favorable initial conditions would have created many more opportunities for K to start building up a true “sales analyst” perception, provided her with a more controlled email-fu learning environment (while handicapping people like J, for whom *laissez-faire* is an advantage), and laid the groundwork for any subsequent intervention needed from T.

For K, it was obviously too late to do this in the specific situation. It was late enough in the engagement that she’d already been labeled, ‘secretary type’ and through her actions, signalled assent to the label. All

the email options (we'll examine such tactical options sometime) would have had a high cost and/or a poor chance of success. The good news: such situational damage is not irreversible. If, in the next engagement, with the next team, K reads the team members accurately and initiates the "early context-setting" strategy successfully, she will start building a solid and advantageous perception. A temporary email band-aid in response to J was still required of course, but less would be riding on it (I suggested a couple to K, after making sure she understood it WAS a band-aid and not a solution).

Moral of the story: you can't always pick your battles, but you *can* choose when, where, how and with whom to fight. Isolated tactical problems are very rare, and if you are seeing any situation as "how do I respond to this email" or "what do I say in this meeting," chances are, you are misframing a broader problem and heading towards your personal Vietnam. There are no formulas. Eyes-wide-open analysis of complete situations and contexts, followed by a deliberate choice of when, where and who to "work" to get where you need to be, is the only way. And this analysis must be informed by self-awareness and understanding of your own limits and others' personalities in the equation. The analysis must be turned into action through a mix of immediate band-aids and well-timed strategic interventions. And after all that, you will still fail often, since there are always uncertainties you cannot model. So you course-correct at multiple levels with feedback.

The good news is that this comprehensive approach leads to "investment" rather than "spending." Rather than every interaction starting from square one, you gradually accumulate a favorable perception/reputation and a repertoire of adequately-practiced skills. It's like gaining new weapons faster than you lose lives in a video game.

How to Interrupt

I unconsciously learned how to interrupt effectively, by watching and starting to imitate a senior executive who was really good at it. But I didn't realize I was doing it, or understand why it worked, until I read *Impro* by Keith Johnstone.

The ineffective method is to wait till the interruptee has finished making the point you disagree with, form a response in your head, and then interrupt with something like, "excuse me, but..." or "sorry for interrupting, but..."

Here's the effective method: you need to interrupt *as soon as* you've roughly understood that there is an objectionable point being made (which can be before the speaker has finished making it), and *before* you've decided what to say. You do so by thinking out aloud, going "Aaaaaahhhhhhhh!" or "Ehhhummfffff!" clearly, and stretching out your interrupt phrase over several seconds, until the interruptee shuts up and looks towards you. And most importantly, it should be patently clear that *you haven't yet decided what to say, and are thinking about it*. This means looking up, down, or away in the distance as you normally would when you are absorbed in thought, not directly at the interruptee. Don't try to stage this. An artificial use of this tactic will be transparent to smart people. You should *actually* start the interrupt at the *real* right time (based on the content of what's being said, rather than the formation of your intention of "I need to stop this"), immediately tune out the room, and start shaping the response in your head. The quality of your timing will tell the other smart people in the room whether you know what you are doing, or faking it.

Why does this work? As Johnstone explains, it is primarily a status thing. Important people feel confident enough about their situational status to effectively say, "I disagree, but I am important enough that you should all shut up and wait while I figure out why, even if it means wasting 10 seconds of everybody's time." In terms of rhetoric, the timing matters, because if you wait till you've formed your response before interrupting, it

is already too late. The interruptee has likely used that point, introduced other points, and moved on with the construction of his/her argument. It may be too late to arrest the momentum. There are other subtleties here, about why and how this works, but rather than work out all the implications, I'll do one example and leave you to work out others. The example: you don't have to look or sound super-confident, but it should be clear from your body language that any uncertainty you display is associated with the real-time *thinking* you are doing, not the social appropriateness of the interrupt. A great example of doing uncertainty right is Vincent D'Onofrio's Robert Goren character in *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*. When he interrupts (usually with this method), he always looks uncertain and fumbling, but still communicates mastery and control of the situation.

How evil is this tactic?

It is good if you are shooting down a truly flawed and stupid point. You are saving everybody time and helping an idiot avoid embarrassment.

It is slightly evil if you are using the tactic to stop a shaky argument in its tracks, but the argument you want to build up in its stead is *equally* shaky (i.e., you are ensuring that your smarter tactics win the day, because you aren't sure that substance will).

It is plain evil when it is evil by whatever standards you maintain that allow you to sleep at night. I am not your priest. Draw your own lines in the sand.

There's a lot more of course, there are good and bad times/places/status situations to interrupt this way, and it can backfire if you use the tactic at the wrong time. A fairly safe time/place to use it is when you control the meeting both substantively and procedurally (for example, you are the chair and also have dictatorial authority over the decisions being made).

On Dodging Decisions

Question evasion is a highly-recognizable behavior, even when done well. Politicians provide us with a lot of examples and practice, so most of us are pretty good at detecting evasion (dealing with it is a different matter). But you probably haven't thought much about a close cousin: dodging decisions. We are often put in the position of having to make decisions that are framed in such a way that all the options are bad. The best way to dodge such a decision is to replace it with another one that allows you to do what you want with far less blowback.

I've never watched the TV thriller *24* regularly, but the other day, I caught a glimpse of a first-season episode with a scene that showcased decision-dodging very well. I call this tactic "emotional charging."

In this episode, super-agent Jack Bauer is at a hospital with his wife, along with the father of a critically-injured teenage girl. Bauer's daughter is missing and the injured girl is the last person who saw her.

The doctor steps out into the lobby and informs the group that the girl is conscious. Bauer immediately requests permission to ask the girl a few questions. The doctor passes the question to the girl's father. The father, for reasons we learn later, does not want the girl questioned. His response is the perfect dodge: "Let me go in and check if she is up to it first."

Compare this to the straight refusal, "no," which would invite argument and debate. By changing the "can I question her?" decision to a "let me judge if she's up to it" decision, the father created a safe way to say no later. "Up to it" is a judgment call that provides wide latitude. More importantly, it is a subjective judgement masquerading as a data-driven one, where even medical professionals would have a tough time over-riding a parent, let alone a third party. Unlike a straight refusal, the "up to it" decision also buys an indeterminate amount of time.

As you might expect, Bauer and his wife accept the idea. You can't really argue with such a reasonable-sounding dodge that doesn't

comprehensively say “no,” but moves the “maybe yes” to a place from where it can slide effectively into a “no.”

It turns out later that the “father” is not really the girl’s father (who has been murdered), but one of the bad guys. He heads in and quietly murders the girl, since she does know important things, and comes back out and feeds Bauer’s wife a lie that allows him to kidnap her (Bauer has been called away in the interim).

But even without such a high-stakes reason to dodge, the impersonator’s decision-dodging tactic is well worth learning. The key is to make the original decision dependent on another decision which requires your subjective interpretation of some emotion-laden missing information. Imagine if the father had been the real father, and the superficial situation had actually played out:

- Father: I am sorry, but she seems really on the brink, I can’t risk letting you question her.
- Bauer: I understand how you feel, but *my* daughter could be in real danger, it’ll only be a minute, and I am sure she can handle it.
- Father (angrily): That’s easy for you to say; it’s not your daughter in there fighting for her life. If it were your daughter in there, you wouldn’t allow it either.

The displacement to a more subjective and emotional decision cannot be challenged easily, especially because the emotion sneaks in later (the original dodge, remember, looks like a quest for missing objective information). If the judgment is questioned, there is a legitimate excuse to get angry. This is why I call the move “emotional charging.” Every significant “people” decision is like a battery which can be charged up with useful emotion if you think hard enough. By injecting enough subjective and emotion-laden information into a decision indirectly, you can make it impossible for others to question your right to make the call unilaterally. Every emotional-charging decision dodge is a case of seeking refuge in the fortress of “don’t tell me how to feel.”

Emotional charging, when available for use, is vastly preferable to more common decision-dodging moves such as referral to a committee (this

cedes too much autonomy to a body that could potentially run amok and not fulfill its appointed “death by consultation” role). The nice thing about the emotional charging tactic is that you still get to decide, and you still get to choose the option you wanted in the original decision. Emotional charging can also help you reel in and speed up a decision that’s outside your locus of control, unlike many one-way dodging tactics that can only delay a decision. An example in *Star Wars*, is Senator Palpatine using the excuse of violence in Naboo to grab power, while making it seem like a subjective emotional burden. It is one of the rare interesting pieces of action in the otherwise psychologically tame *Star Wars* saga.

The technique is particularly effective against those who pride themselves on being “data-driven” decision-makers. Subjectivity is their Achilles heel.

Inside the Tempo

We've come a long way and covered a lot of ground. So in this chapter, I am going to try and put the whole Be Slightly Evil philosophy in perspective and introduce a capstone idea that will hopefully pull together the material we've explored in previous chapters.

This is the murky idea of being *inside the tempo* of an opponent, arguably one of the most difficult ideas to understand in adversarial decision-making. The idea is often referred to as being *inside the decision-cycle*, where the reference is to the OODA (observe-orient-decide-act) model developed by John Boyd, but I prefer *inside the tempo* because it gets away from the specific structural idea of a "cycle." The word *tempo* goes beyond just the rhythms of an adversarial decision process to its emotions and energy flows.

The idea has been best articulated in the world of Boydian strategic thinking, but versions exist in most sophisticated decision-making domains. In business for instance, "inside the tempo," properly understood, corresponds to the idea of disruption in Clayton Christensen's sense. In games like chess and martial arts, "inside the tempo" is about playing your opponent rather than the game (as Boyd said, "fight the enemy, not the terrain").

The idea actually applies to cooperative decision-making as well (an attentive parent or teacher can be "inside the tempo" of a child's behavior for instance), but adversarial contexts tend to bring out the richness of the model better.

Being inside an adversary's tempo is all about *wrangling luck to exploit habits*.

Wrangling Luck

To a first approximation, the difference between artificial games and life is that in life, luck is a variable you can influence much more powerfully. This is because you get to change rules in open-ended ways instead of just operating within a closed set of rules and a pair of dice. So the open game of life, to a large extent, is about wrangling luck by playing with rules.

Real life is uncertain and messy for everybody, and an adversary is anyone who is trying to create better-than-random conditions for themselves by creating worse-than-random conditions for you, via the meta-game of rule-making and rule-breaking. To compete, you must do the same where necessary.

To get inside the tempo of an adversary is to recognize and exploit the ways in which he or she (or it, in the case of organizations) is a *creature of habit*. And we all are creatures of habit to some extent because we possess limited attention. Winning in competitive settings is about exploiting your adversary's habits before he/she/it can exploit yours.

There are many ways to exploit others' habits, but wrangling luck is perhaps the most powerful way. Wrangling luck effectively creates a sort of "competitive climate" comprising patterns of *serendipity* and its opposite, *zemblanity*.

Competitive Climates

You're in a world where luck is the scarce resource, because there are more ways for things to go wrong than right. If you can direct more luck towards yourself and more misfortune towards your adversary, you've amplified the effectiveness of just about everything else you do.

In open competitive environments, luck is not just about die-rolls or card shuffles. It is a control variable. *The control variable*. In the overall game of life, your big goal is to drive serendipity towards yourself and its opposite, zemblanity (there, you learned a new word) towards your adversaries.

When luck is being consciously wrangled in a real-life game, winning feels like things miraculously going your way, things falling into place for you just right, unreasonably out of proportion to your actions. This is *serendipity*.

By contrast, losing feels like an overpowering sense of doom and snowballing misfortunes out of proportion to your sins and stupidity. This is *zemblanity*.

Creating patterns of serendipity and zemblanity that favor you and disadvantage your adversaries is perhaps the most general goal in competitive behavior.

The first order of business, once you've decided to start wrangling luck in a domain, is to *create a real-world game*.

There are two distinct setup moves, *people* moves and *process* moves. A fundamental tenet of luck wrangling is that you do *people before process*. This means creating a configuration of alliances and oppositions to create a *pattern of conflict* (for the Boydians among you, I mean something slightly different from what you might assume).

Creating Patterns of Conflict

The more real the game, the less trivial the problem of setting up patterns of conflict. In a chess game, two people simply sit down across from each other. In a pickup soccer game, captains might take turns picking players and get the game going within minutes.

In real-life adversarial environments, the decision of when to cooperate or compete becomes non-trivial and highly situation-dependent. It can be a harder problem than the actual procedural game-play. In fact, if you create the right configuration of alliances and oppositions, the game might be over before it begins, once the configuration is signaled to all parties. Weaker

alliances often simply give up in the face of invincible opposition, offering walkovers.

So before you even *make* an opening move, you have to calibrate the default level of competitiveness or cooperativeness with which you approach a situation and create the right configuration.

Being combative when it's time to cooperate, or trying to broker peace when there is clearly some competitive energy needed, can actually backfire. As the counterintuitive old saying goes (overloaded a bit), if you want peace, prepare for war, if you want war, prepare for peace.

But it is possible to get too clever in the people-setup stage. Let's do a side-bar on loyalty.

Slightly Evil Loyalty

How do you do manage your loyalties so you are being neither child-like, nor all *Game of Thrones* about it? I'll offer you three laws, but not justify them in detail. That would be a separate 5000-word essay.

For the first law, in place of *win-win or no-deal*, I offer you: *adult-adult or no deal*.

Broken promises are inevitable under conditions of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA). It is important to avoid demanding, or promising, absolute loyalty. Dealing with people who trade in childlike absolute loyalties is not worth it unless they are actually children.

When you deal with adults, loyalty is not a value you have to apply but a budget you have to manage. In everyday life, you may never have to choose between a girlfriend and an idealistic politician as Batman was forced to, by the Joker, but you're probably going to be disappointing

people throughout your life. Managing how you spread the disappointment around is how you manage your loyalty budget.

The second law is about drawing a good line in the sand between slightly evil and true evil: any loyalty you offer or accept has to be *contingent but sincere*.

It is possible to use loyalty itself as a game variable. You can win confidence in order to betray it. You can act adversarial to gain attention in order to win an alliance.

But most of us are not living a spy-versus-spy life game. In everyday life, people will forgive broken promises with just a sincere apology, but not bad-faith promises. Faking good faith consistently is more trouble than it is worth.

The third law of slightly evil loyalty: *never be your own #1*.

Consider your actions under situations of severe, but not absurd stress. Not thought experiments involving torture by evil dictators, but realistic stresses such as losing half your savings and being forced to choose which of two children to send to college. Think about making a list of assorted people in your life, in decreasing order of the severity of situations that might lead you to betray them. So a child might top the list, and a random, but nice-seeming waiter might be at the bottom.

Now put yourself on that list, in the right position: what sort of stress would make you break promises to yourself? You will likely find that you won't be putting yourself at the top of the list. Most of us will have at least one person we would put ahead of ourselves. That's the paradox of being slightly evil: it is far easier to Be Slightly Evil on behalf of someone else. If this seems like a particularly complex point, that's because it is. Don't worry if you don't get it immediately.

To summarize:

1. Adult-adult or no deal: don't ask for, or offer, absolute loyalties
2. Contingent but sincere: don't play loyalty games

3. Don't be your own #1: it is easier to Be Slightly Evil on behalf of others

Once you've created a pattern of conflict that respects the three laws, it's time to frame *rules of engagement*: unilateral agreements with yourself that limit how you act. This is the *process setup* stage.

Rules of Engagement

Rules of engagement are about much more than modeling the ethics of how you enter the fray in a domain. Those are an important but relatively minor part of the work involved.

A more important function of rules of engagement is to *manage risk*. Limiting the damage when things go wrong.

But the primary purpose is *directing luck towards yourself*. The most important work involved in creating rules of engagement is figuring out how to stack the odds in your favor before you begin playing, by deploying your existing advantages.

Few artificial competitions have this feature (an example is the America's Cup sailing competition, where winning teams get to define the rules for the next competition).

In artificial games, rules of engagement are mostly about picking the right game to play. So a poker player might survey a room and pick a table.

But real life is about *creating* games, which means drawing your own boundaries, picking which rules to bend or break, and which rules to try and enforce. By creating a pattern of conflict through cooperation/competition/loyalty decisions, you've already drawn a boundary, and drawn people into the fray whether they want to play or not.

If you've been smart, you've chosen to draw a boundary in a way that offers some potential for rule-making and rule-breaking, which generally means you've circumscribed a region that is not entirely and unambiguously governed by any *single* existing game. If you're lucky, you might even have a some no-rules virgin territory to work with. If not, you'll have a domain of overlapping games, none of which dictates all the action.

The biggest characteristic of such an environment is that it is somewhere between complex and chaotic, so you have to be constantly modeling and remodeling it just to maintain situation awareness, even if you're doing nothing more than observing.

Any set of rules of engagement that actually gets you and others moving from a state of situation-aware immobility in the face of such "chaoplexity" is a *real-world game*. Unlike formal games, real-world games can be understood as collisions between competing sets of rules of engagement, independently selected by the players. Sets of rules that can be arbitrarily and unilaterally changed as play progresses.

Why focus on rules you make for yourself? What about rules agreed to by consensus among *all* players? Rules inherited from society?

To focus on convention and social rules is to put the cart before the horse. Ultimately, the only rules that actually matter in competition are the ones individuals and organizations impose on themselves and voluntarily follow. Other rules in the environment are not rules at all, but *risks* to be modeled and managed. If you decide not to pay your taxes because the government has lost legitimacy in your view, you have to deal with the *risk* of getting caught and punished by forces more powerful than you.

The environment is a playing field where your self-imposed rules collide with the self-imposed rules of others, creating *conflict*. Unlike chess boards and football fields, the playing field for real-world games is some arbitrarily (and fuzzily) delineated area of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, with an open and leaky boundary.

VUCA Fields

VUCA is the overall environmental condition out of which games precipitate. Wrangling luck by influencing how serendipity and zemblanity slosh around is the same as wrangling VUCA.

While a lot of VUCA emerges in the physical environment, in competitive settings, much of it originates in *people*, in the social layer of gameplay itself. So in the context of interpersonal interactions, VUCA means the following:

- **Volatility:** there are no pure friends or enemies; most players you interact with are likely to be allies today, adversaries tomorrow and neutrals the day after.
- **Uncertainty:** it is hard to tell potential allies and adversaries apart at a fundamental level, because situations and optimal patterns of loyalty are fundamentally murky..
- **Complexity:** Ever tried to diagram the set of who-hates-whom/who-likes-whom in the organization chart of a corporation? Intractable beyond about a dozen.
- **Ambiguity:** The environment is what it is. Ambiguity is a feature of your mental model of it, characterized by *ifs*, *buts* and *maybes* in your thinking about a situation.

So social-origin VUCA leads to more possibilities than actualities. More flirting than commitments. More tentative probing than decisive action. A social environment with a lot of ambiguity in the collective mindsphere is one where nobody wants to be the first to act because of the high risks, but where there is a huge individual and collective cost to not acting.

Risk is a function of VUCA. The higher the VUCA, the higher the perceived risk of any path.

The *ifs*, *buts* and *maybes* created by VUCA lead to indecision and paralysis. So unlike artificial games, where a starter's pistol marks the beginning by convention, in real-world games, action has to be deliberately *precipitated* out of VUCA by an act of sheer will.

Precipitating Action

Creating a game is about precipitating action out of VUCA, by creating a zone of artificial clarity. Something as simple as declaring to yourself, "I want a million dollars" is enough to create such a zone. But not all games are created equal. Some unleash a lot more energy than others.

A high-potential game has few rules, and unleashes a lot of collective energy. Technology revolutions are an example. A low-potential game has many rules and unleashes much less energy. Political wrangling in Washington, DC is an example.

Action precipitates out of VUCA because it is an unstable state. This instability manifests as a paradox.

On the one hand, not acting is often as risky, or riskier, than acting. This means, any decisive action might be better than the status quo.

On the other hand, acting first creates vulnerability. When you act decisively in a VUCA environment, you create a signal in a noisy environment that is likely to be immediately spotted, interpreted and intelligently responded to by competitors.

When everybody is waiting around or cautiously probing, it is hard to mask decisive movement. Because decisive movement creates an energy signature. Even if you pretend nothing is happening and act nonchalant, it is hard to hide serious, focused energy flows. Walk into the cafeteria of a major company at lunch time. You can immediately tell which project teams are just excited to be seeing some real action and which ones are trapped in a fog of indecision.

So playing VUCA chess means being good at opening with both white and black pieces. You have to know how to be the decisive first-mover, and you have to know how to be a decisive fast-follower. Both are ways of creating the game.

The Three Phases of a Game

Once somebody has precipitated action in a VUCA environment, you have to navigate an opening phase, where players jockey for position to define the rules.

Next you have to learn to play the mid-game, after the system has lost its memory of the opening phase.

And finally, you have to learn to script end-games, which, unlike in board games, are not a function of game-play rules, but conscious *time to cash out/cut losses* exit decisions.

These three phases exist in artificial games as well. But unlike artificial games, where everybody notices when the game starts, real-world games can begin stealthily and asymmetrically. Some players may start before others.

They can also close stealthily: early, big winners might stealthily cash out and move on and as part of the setup for the *next game*, to try to keep potential competitors playing the *last game* as though it still mattered.

Let's examine the three phases in more detail.

The Opening

VUCA is a condition of noise waiting to be turned into information.

When you choose to play white – be the first to act under VUCA – the key is to turn noise into signal, attract cooperation and delay or misdirect competition.

This is what it means to bank a *first-mover advantage*. This last bit means masking your actions so that any potential adversaries either ignore you for longer than they should (i.e. you engineer a delayed reaction), or even better, start heading in the wrong direction.

Stealth and misdirection in short.

Imagine how different chess would be if you were allowed to start the game and make a bunch of moves before the opponent gets to the table, and continue making more moves on your own while he temporarily plays at the wrong board.

So you have to discover a *raw signal* on one end (privileged market intelligence in a business context for example) that represents a prize worth fighting over, and send a refined version towards your allies (otherwise what value are you adding?) and a noisier version towards adversaries (amplified VUCA). Think of this as the process of striking gold. You want to let your friends know to come join you, but you want to avoid triggering a general gold rush before you've had a chance to take all you want.

It is not easy to script this kind of white opening. Most people fumble either by ignoring the competition too much, ignoring allies too much or ignoring signal-generation too much. But when you get it right, you can develop runaway momentum and a solid trust-bank, while sending your competitors off a cliff. Amazon has mastered this type of opening, but lately, they've been burning up trust in favor of greater competitive maneuverability at a potentially unsustainable rate. Their future will be interesting to watch. Jeff Bezos' philosophy of "being willing to be misunderstood" is highly effective for competitive maneuvering, but it comes with a price.

What about opening with black; fast-following? Your challenge is to first *detect* that moves are being made, read the opening moves of the first mover correctly, neutralize any feinting designed to send you off towards the wrong game, and pursue in the right direction, faster than they are moving, because you have to catch up and overtake.

But unlike in war or purely adversarial situations, in slightly adversarial ones, you can be too clever for your own good, especially when playing white. Your stealth and misdirection of potential adversaries might alienate potential allies and destroy trust when you are “found out.”

There is also a direct cost. One of the ways you attract allies is by giving them opportunities to imitate your successful moves. If you mask them too much, imitation and the cooperative scaling which results from it will fail. In some cases, making your moves completely transparent may be the right white opening. This is the well-known modern *openness* strategy practiced in the technology industry.

So opening-game maneuvering needs to protect allies (shielding), or anticipate and accommodate allied losses on each maneuver (controlled losses).

Far too many people who get interested in Slightly Evil philosophies imagine that they’re playing in a truly vicious *Game of Thrones* world of near-constant backstabbing and unstable loyalties. There is perverse satisfaction to be found in such dark romantic fantasies, but they are no more realistic than the win-win-or-no-deal approach of unqualified cooperationists. Outside of perhaps parts of the finance industry, a *Game of Thrones* mental model is simply not accurate, and operating like it is can backfire badly.

The Mid-Game

In the mid-game, the fog of indecision gets replaced by the fog of war. Instead of *I don’t know what to do*, you get *I don’t know what the hell is going on*.

The key to the mid-game is to treat it as a fractal regime of sub-games and sub-sub-games. What prevents such dynamic mid-games from turning into stalemates is that the non-human part of the environment tends to keep

changing, constantly undermining the assumptions underlying previous successes, and creating potential openings for changes in the leaderboard.

The key to the mid-game is exploiting the complacency of power. Once all players declared their nominal claims to various bits of territory, and have secured actual control over some subset of it, all players have something to lose. Which means there is a defensive agenda to preserve what has been secured, in addition to an offensive agenda to secure more.

Agendas of defense generally receive much less attention and resources than agendas of offense. This is necessary. Winning would be worthless if holding on to winnings took as much ongoing effort as gaining them. The lowered level of effort manifests as *habits*.

A habit is an efficient pattern of action dissociated from the logic that created it, and built around a fundamental desire or aversion.

The efficiency arises from automation and the suspension of active thought. The ongoing motivation comes from the presence of a core desire or aversion. Habits and automation are at the heart of the vulnerability that makes inside-the-tempo attacks possible. So it deserves a second special sidebar.

Habits as Vulnerability

Automation is about steady and predictable rhythms, emotions and energy patterns. A fixed tempo. At the heart of such a stable tempo is a stable decision-cycle.

To use OODA terminology, a habit is an OODA cycle where the second O, *orient* has been unplugged, leaving behind a non-adaptive O-DA cycle. Note that *unconscious* habits of adaptation simply represent more complex habits, not habits monitored by a conscious process of ongoing orientation and *creative* adaptation.

As a challenger who has temporarily acknowledged defeat on some front, what you need to do is *create an opening* to restart the competition. That means watching the environment more closely than the complacent adversary, spotting environmental changes earlier, figuring out what assumptions they undermine, and starting a subgame to take advantage.

Sometimes, all you need is the complacency of steady profitability. At other times, the incumbent adversary remains on high alert, sacrificing some profitability in order to remain responsive to threats. In these cases, creating an opening means creating distractions on one front so you can open up another in peace.

An alert adversary in a mid-game is a bundle of learned habits, both simple and complex, *primed to respond faster and more instinctively to some threats than others*. These are their *strengths*. They are also their *push-button vulnerabilities*.

So if you can create a false signal that suggests a watched assumption is being undermined, you can exploit the absorption of limited attention on one front to open up another. You want a special kind of distraction to create instinctive fumbling driven by zemblanity rather than decisive responses: fear-uncertainty-doubt. FUD.

FUD is artificial VUCA created to drive up zemblanity for an adversary. When you have a game in progress and an active adversary who has a strong position in the current game, creating VUCA on one front where they feel strong, in order to drain attention without triggering action, is what allows you to break a stalemate.

There is an interesting psychological effect here known as inattentional blindness – the effect that allows somebody in a gorilla suit to run unnoticed across a basketball court with a game in progress. Because there is confusing but relatively legible action going on in one corner, you miss incomprehensible action elsewhere. Your attention locks onto things that it can process more easily into active situation awareness.

But these tactics only have predictable consequences if they target ingrained strong habits in an adversary. An adversary directing attention

and energy via habits is an adversary who is *thinking* (O-DA) but not *thinking about thinking* (O-orienting) in open-ended and creative ways.

The extent to which an adversary has energy left to devote to thinking-about-thinking is the extent to which he/she still has an active orientation component to their decision-making. Opening up one front may not enough to exhaust *orientation potential*. You may need to open up front after front in order to move all attention from withheld potential to active executive attention.

Once you manage to create an opening and gain a foothold, you've created a sub-game the adversary cannot shut down immediately. Sub-games are similar to top-level games, but are more constrained by existing rules of engagement, and involve smaller wins. This is because there is already a game in progress around the sub-game.

As the action develops, energy increasingly shifts to kinetic form, and each new sub-game wrinkle that develops has less potential energy – orientation potential – to draw on. VUCA turns into what is known as *dynamic* VUCA, or VUCA(D). We really ought to call it *kinetic* VUCA to emphasize the potential energy/kinetic energy analogy.

When all available potential energy has been drawn into action, and it becomes impossible to start new sub-games without stopping old-subgames, a cascade of ceded games and exchange sacrifices commences, setting up the end-game.

End Games

When everybody has all their energy fully committed to a set of ongoing games at multiple interconnected levels, you're beyond both the fog of indecision and the fog of war. You're entering the *fog of exhaustion*. Often, players who have already banked big wins secure and liquidate their assets and exit the field of play entirely if they can.

Much of the intelligence has been squeezed out of the system through the creation of layers and layers of gameplay, whose rules have captured all available intelligence and capacity for continuous reorientation.

In military thinking, this phase is often referred to as a *melee*, where there's only energy left for instinctive action. You've learned all you're going to learn. You've used up all the tricks you have. What's left is energy and muscle memory. What follows is relatively dumb action, a last-player-standing situation, where unforced errors, attention exhaustion and resource exhaustion drive the action.

When resources are exhausted, players simply drop out. When resources remain, but attention is fully absorbed on multiple active fronts, fatal vulnerabilities open up for others to exploit, even without FUD-creation. These are unforced errors. So ceding some contests in order to create a reserve of attention, before a fatal number of unforced errors accumulate, is a necessary strategy.

In many ways, Microsoft's loss of market leadership to Apple in the consumer market was a case of end-game exhaustion rather than clever maneuvering by Apple. Microsoft had so much going on, on so many fronts, especially in enterprise markets, that even without artificially created FUD, it did not have the attention or energy left to respond meaningfully to Apple's moves. Now as the games created by Apple – smartphones and tablets – enter a late mid-game phase, we are seeing Apple being drawn into similar unforced errors.

Of course, you can drive competitors to this state by forcing accumulating losses on them, primarily by opening up an exhausting number of fronts for them to respond to. This is because creating games is cheaper for those with less to lose. But as endgames get underway, zemblanity also has a *natural* tendency to take over the action, without artificial help.

So endgames are naturally messy.

They may not be very dynamic, but when an active war is shutting down, there is still a lot of cleaning up to do. It may sound grim, but that's what it looks like. There are broken things everywhere, wounds and corpses, general messiness. Things collapsing due to zemblanity forces that have been set in motion but are too large to control.

The VUCA is changing flavor once again: from VUCA(D) to VUCA(E), E for *entropy*.

Why “Inside the Tempo”?

So what does the phrase “inside the tempo” actually mean? I’ve described it as a process of a group of adversarial players collectively trying to outmaneuver each other by creating games and games-within-games, and continuously maneuvering until players start to exit or die.

It’s the memetic equivalent of a genetic arms race in biology.

I’ve also described it, in parallel, as VUCA turning into VUCA(D) and into VUCA(E). Potential energy (capacity for open-ended creative reorientation) turning into kinetic energy (layers of habits that account for most of the energy flow) and eventually into a state of entropic collapse.

And finally, I’ve also described it as a process of declining intelligence. From an opening phase of great cleverness, daring and imagination, where heroes are born, to a mid-game phase with increasing amounts of energy trapped in habits, to an end-game that’s mostly dumb energy, with very little intelligence and often no residual value: sound and fury signifying nothing.

But the nice thing about living in a nice little neighborhood of the universe, with the sun shining down on us, delivering a continuous stream of low-entropy energy, is that this game can create *wealth*. Wealth that can create a period of prosperity and peace before we have to do it all over again.

The phrase “inside the tempo” is appropriate because on the whole, partially adversarial situations drive up intelligence through open, Darwinian competition among competitors continuously getting inside each other’s heads by exploiting habits of thought. Mental models grow and strengthen all around, turning the latent truths of VUCA into the codified rules of a hierarchical complex of game play: a landscape of institutions.

Landscapes of institutions extract wealth from the environment for a period of time before collapsing under their own weight, contributing to the primordial chaos from which new games can begin: the process of creative destruction.

Without adversarial competition, we'd collectively spiral down into stupidity as a species. By racing against each other, we manage to collectively outrun the forces of entropy for a while.

This is why, despite being a vegetarian who abhors unnecessary cruelty and pain, especially towards those who cannot protect themselves, I fundamentally don't like the mind-atrophying idea of a permanent peace under conditions of permanent, unqualified abundance. Competition is ultimately the essence of life itself. To be slightly evil is to embrace life.

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